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Outlier: The Case of Austin's Declining African-American Population

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INTRODUCTION

Austin, Texas has consistently ranked among the fastest growing major cities in the United States (a major city is defined here as one with a population of more than 500,000 in 2000). U.S. Census data from 2000 and 2010 reveal a total population growth rate of 20.4%, making Austin the third fastest growing major city in the nation during that decade. But among the ten fastest growing major cities in the United States, Austin stood out in one crucial respect: it was the only such city that suffered a net loss in its African-American population. Indeed, between 2000 and 2010, Austin was a statistical outlier—it was the only major city in the United States to experience a double-digit rate of general population growth coincident with African-American population decline.

Drawing upon U.S. Census Data, this brief analyzes the declining number of African Americans in Austin from 2000 to 2010. Throughout this brief we analyze city data exclusively, as opposed to the metropolitan statistical area (MSA) data. The goal of this series is to provide policy recommendations primarily at the city level.



AUSTIN STANDS ALONE

U.S. Census data from 2000 and 2010 reveal that cities experiencing general population growth greater than 10% saw simultaneous growth in their African-American population. Nine of the ten cities in Figure 1 experienced positive growth in African American populations. The average rate of African-American population growth for the ten fastest growing major cities in the United States was 16.7%.

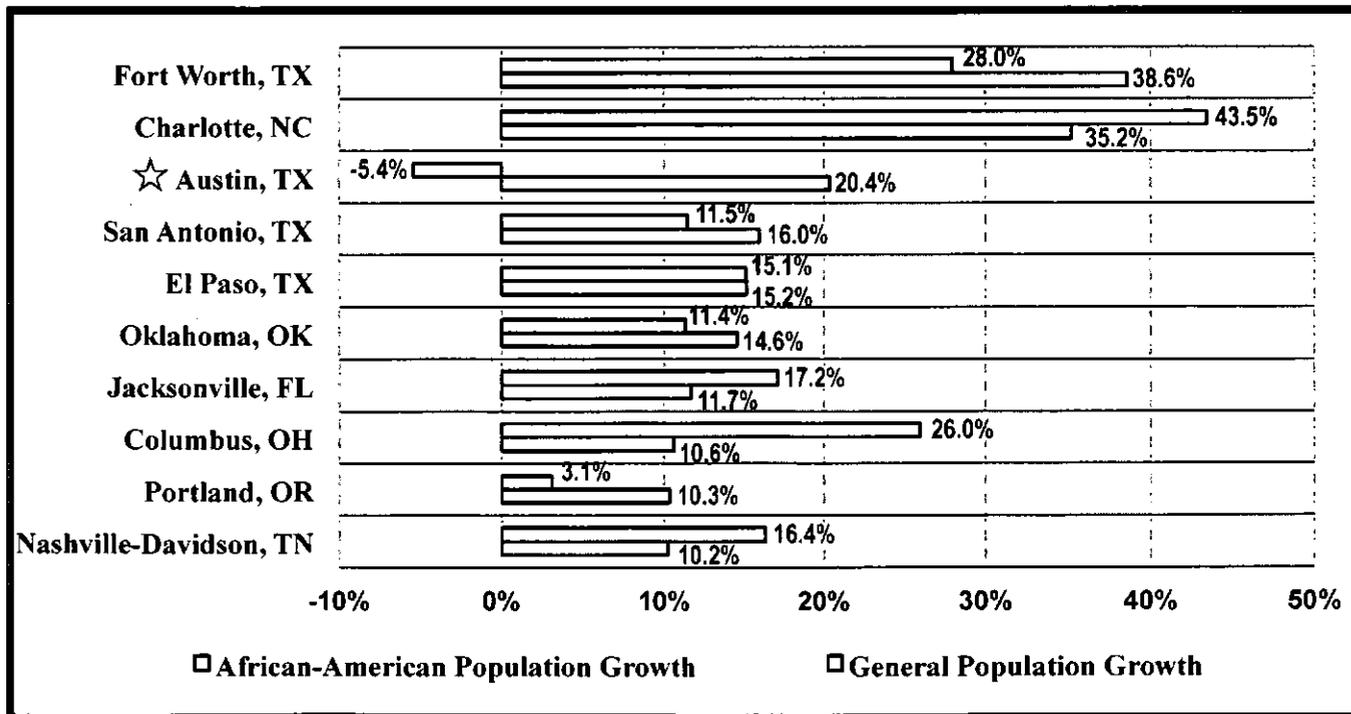
Charlotte, North Carolina saw the sharpest increase in its African-American population, 43.5%, with a general population growth of 35.2%. Portland, Oregon saw the smallest increase in its African-American population at 3.1%, with a general population growth of 10.3%. Charlotte and Portland can both

claim positive growth in the African-American population. For both cities, general population growth and African-American growth point in the same direction, even if the former outpaces the latter.

This represents the norm for all cities on the top ten list, save for one—Austin.

By contrast, Austin experienced a decline in African Americans at -5.4%, with general population growth of 20.4%. It is the only city among the ten fastest growing cities where general population growth and African-American growth point in opposite directions.

Figure 1: Ten Fastest Growing Major Cities in the United States, 2000-2010





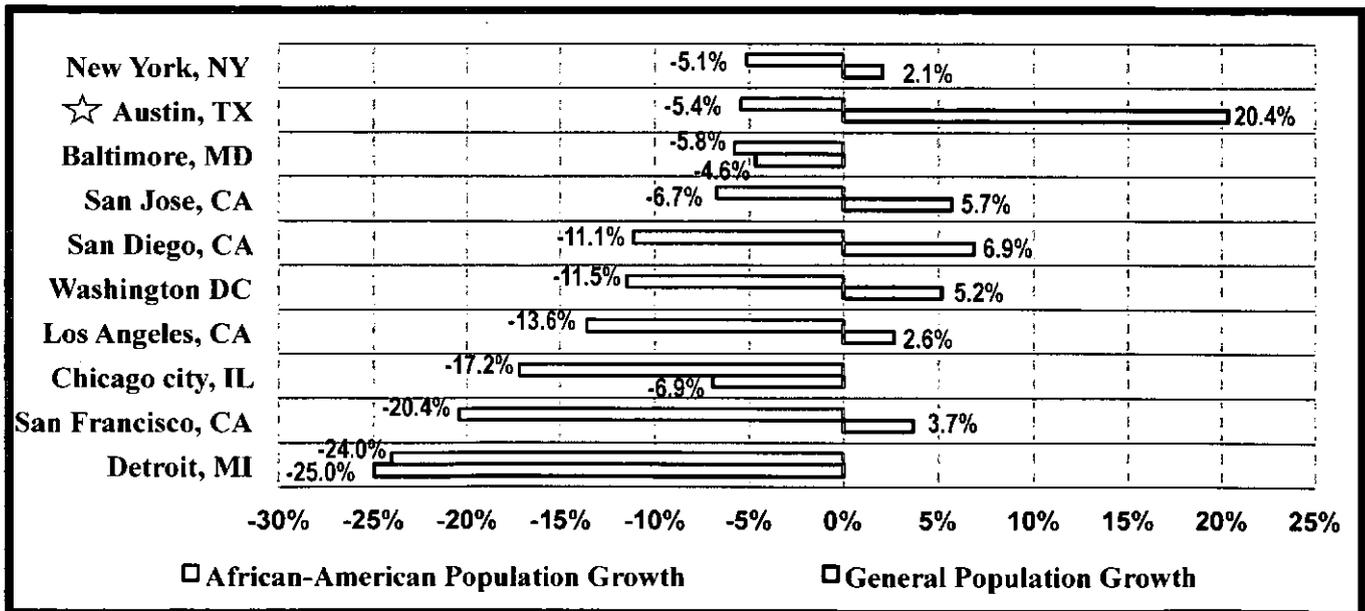
AUSTIN COMPARED TO OTHER MAJOR U.S. CITIES: AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION DECLINE

African-American population declines are not uncommon for major U.S. cities. The outmigration of African-American residents from cities such as Washington D.C., Detroit, and Chicago has been well documented (Glaeser & Vigdor, 2012; Wilson, 2013). However, these cities did not experience the same rate of general population growth as Austin and the other nine cities on the top-ten growth list. In fact, none of these three cities ranked in the top twenty for general population growth. Washington D.C. saw a general growth rate of 5.2%, while Detroit and Chicago actually experienced general population losses (See Figure 2). This is not to say that African-American population losses in these cities should be viewed as less troubling than Austin's decline in African Americans.

Rather, our point is to properly contextualize such losses across each city. When we contrast African-American losses against general population changes in each city, Austin consistently emerges as the statistical outlier.

According to Figure 2, California's largest cities—Los Angeles, San Jose, San Francisco and San Diego—also experienced significant African-American population losses between 2000 and 2010. However, none of these cities experienced a general growth rate comparable to Austin's. Among California cities, San Diego saw the largest general population growth rate at 6.9%. Austin's general population growth rate was three times that number.

Figure 2: Top Ten Major Cities with the Fastest Rate of African-American Population Decline in the U.S., 2000-2010





HOW DOES AUSTIN COMPARE TO OTHER MAJOR TEXAS CITIES REGARDING AFRICAN-AMERICAN POPULATION CHANGES?

Houston and Dallas are the two other major Texas cities that experienced African-American population declines between 2000 and 2010. However, here again, these cities did not see general population growth comparable to Austin's. Moreover, the respective African-American populations in these two cities declined at a rate significantly lower than Austin's. Houston experienced 7.5% general population growth, with only -0.4% African-American population decline. Dallas experienced 0.8% general population growth, with only -3.5% African-American population decline (See Figure 3).

When compared to Austin, Houston and Dallas are also significantly larger cities with economic and geographic conditions

that are very distinct from the state's capital. However, when we compare Austin to other major Texas cities that maintain comparable populations or share regional and economic conditions—Fort Worth, El Paso, and San Antonio—the results are rather striking.

Similar to Austin, these three cities experienced double-digit general population growth. Yet, unlike Austin, all three of these cities also experienced simultaneous double-digit positive growth in African Americans.

Fort Worth, San Antonio, and El Paso had 38.6%, 16%, and 15.2% general growth rates, respectively, while experiencing 28%, 11.5%, and 15.1% of African-American population growth, respectively (See Figure 4).

Figure 3: Population growth patterns of Austin, Houston, and Dallas, 2000-2010

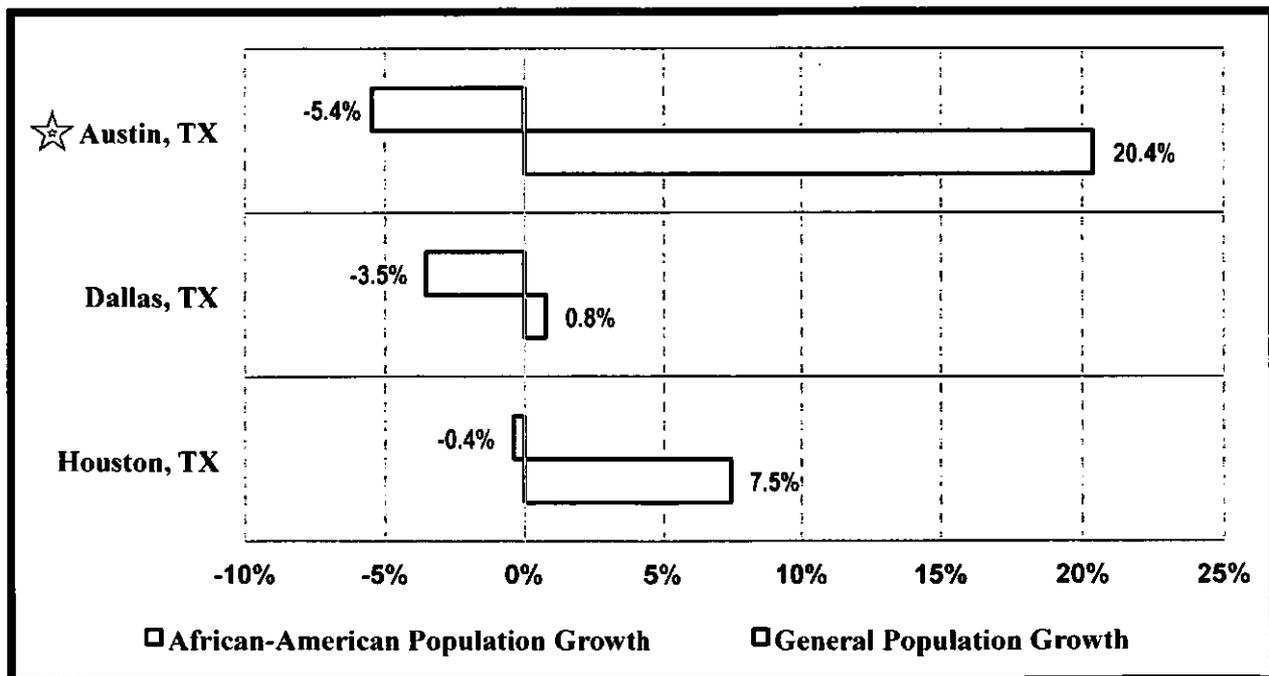
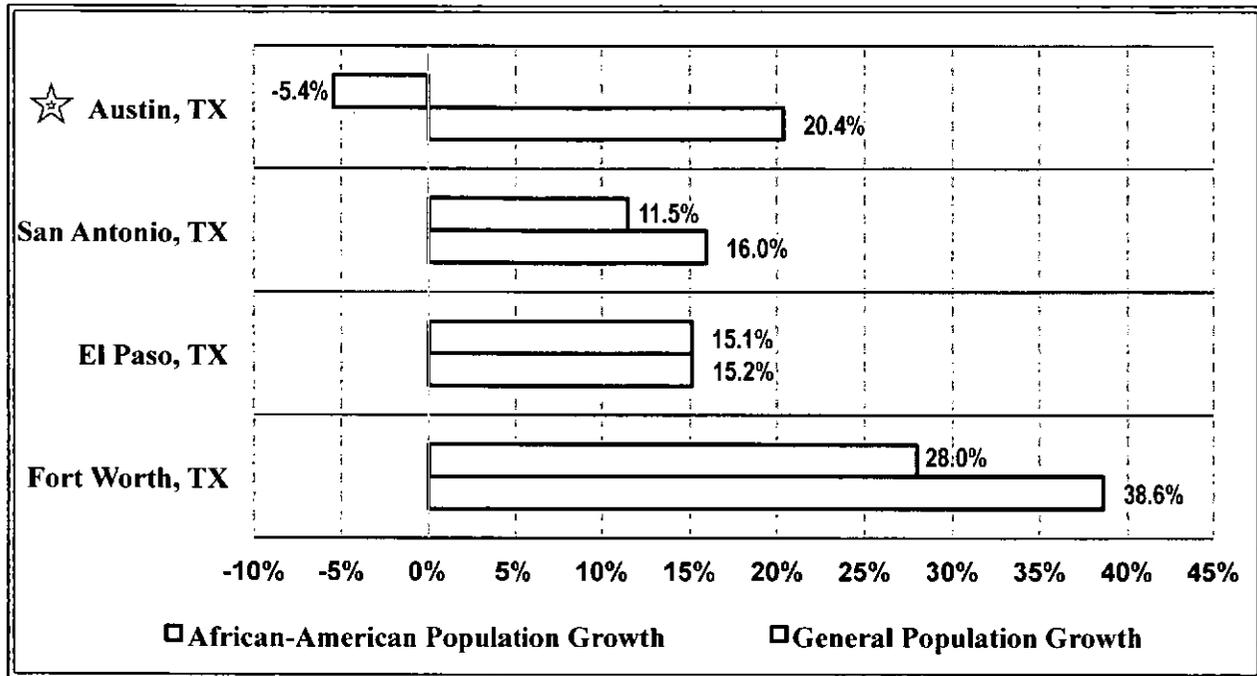




Figure 4: Population growth patterns of Austin, El Paso, Fort Worth, and San Antonio, 2000-2010



THE ONLY GROUP IN AUSTIN EXPERIENCING A DECLINE IS AFRICAN AMERICANS

Austin’s outlier status is further underscored by the fact that between 2000 and 2010, African Americans were the only racial group in Austin to see a decline. Whereas, Whites, Latinos, and Asian Americans all saw positive population growth during this decade (See Table 1).

	White	African-American	Hispanic	Asian
Population in 2000	347,554	64,259	200,579	30,580
Population in 2010	385,271	60,760	277,707	49,159
% Change	10.9%	-5.4%	38.5%	60.8%



DISCUSSION

Austin was the only major city in the United States to experience a double-digit population growth rate while simultaneously seeing a decline in African-Americans.

Moreover, African-Americans were the only racial group in the city that did not see positive growth during that decade. These are troubling statistics, considering that Austin's African-American community is as old as the city itself. Its history is defined by the struggle against slavery, the establishment of free communities, major cultural achievements, and the movement to end both *de jure* and *de facto* segregation. Moreover, these patterns do not square with Austin's reputation as a "tolerant" city, one celebrated for its progressivism, cultural dynamism, and emphasis on sustainability. Indeed, Austin is often pointed to as the liberal exception in an otherwise conservative state. It is commonly held that

The data analyzed in this brief suggest that Austin, as a liberal city, may have been unwelcoming to African Americans.

liberal politics dovetail with the concerns of African Americans, and yet in Austin this does not seem to hold true. The data analyzed in this brief suggest that Austin, as a liberal city, may have been unwelcoming to African Americans.

In what follows we postulate that the declining number of African Americans in Austin was the result of persistent structural inequalities. That is, African Americans did not choose to leave Austin so much as they were compelled to leave by several structural forces—historical, economic, and governmental—that continued to create inequalities in their lives. Below, we outline some of these factors, suggesting that each played a partial role in the outmigration of African Americans from Austin during a decade in which every other racial group in the city grew in size.



SEGREGATION FOLLOWED BY GENTRIFICATION

In 1928, the City of Austin commissioned a “Master Plan” that divided the city into its present-day geography. Prior to 1928, African Americans lived throughout the city in various enclaves, but the largest concentration of African Americans could be found in the area just east of today’s central downtown business district. The city’s plan called for this area to become the “negro district,” and African Americans were compelled to move there because the city’s only black schools, black parks, and other facilities were located within its boundaries. If African Americans were to access public institutions and services, they could only do so within this district. Since racially segregated public schools and facilities were legal at the time, city leaders used this access as leverage to force African Americans into the district without violating the U.S. constitution. By 1930, nearly 80% of the African-American population in Austin had relocated to the so-called “negro district” (Humphrey, 1997).

From the mid-1950s through the late 1970s, African Americans led the charge to desegregate the city. Nevertheless, the African-American community was still concentrated in the erstwhile “negro district,” where African Americans owned homes and businesses, worshiped, and studied. However, as Austin underwent its

economic boom during the 1990s and early 2000s, African Americans of east Austin became primary targets of gentrification, partially due to the district’s proximity to a burgeoning downtown. Those who promulgated the 1928 Master Plan likely never anticipated that the territory just east of downtown would one day become coveted land for new business owners, real estate developers, and a new professional class. As the value of property increased so did property taxes. This enticed African-American residents to sell their property, especially when their children were unlikely to replace them as property owners (Castillo, 2011).

All told, the combined effects of concentrated segregation and concentrated gentrification of Austin’s historic African-American district provide a partial explanation for the rapid decline in African-American residents between 2000 and 2010. Yet the question remains why did African Americans leave Austin entirely after being displaced from the area just east of downtown? Why did they move outside of the city limits as opposed to relocating to more affordable areas within Austin? We propose that the answer can be found by looking beyond segregation and gentrification to other structural forces.



POLICING

In 2004, the Austin chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed a civil rights complaint against the Austin Police Department (APD) on the grounds that African Americans were disproportionately targeted for the use of excessive force (Complaint, 2012). According to the NAACP these trends were emblematic of APD's long history of discrimination and abuse of African Americans. Between 2002 and 2012, a total of 10 unarmed civilians died during encounters with Austin police; seven were African Americans, two were Latinos and one was white (Sheible, 2014). Following a Department of Justice (DOJ) investigation, which lasted from May 2007 through December 2008, APD undertook several reforms, including revision of its use-of-force policy. But in 2009,

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immediately following the close of the federal investigation, the percentage of use-of-force and bias-based complaints spiked (Dexheimer & Plohetski, 2013). In 2009, African Americans made up only 8% of the city's population yet they accounted for 30% of those who filed formal complaints against the APD (Complaint, 2012).

The events leading up to the 2004 complaint and the DOJ investigation, as well as the subsequent increase in use-of-force and bias-based complaints in 2009 coincide with the decade in which Austin experienced its decline in its African-American population. Future research should be conducted to assess whether the troubled relationship between the African-American residents and the APD contributed to this decline.



DISPARITIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

According to the City of Austin's demographer, the -5.4% decline in the city's African-American population between 2000 and 2010 was comprised mostly of those under the age of 18 (Robinson, 2013). This suggests that the outmigration of African Americans had to do with diminishing educational opportunities for children.

When African Americans moved into the racially segregated district following the Master Plan of 1928, they did so largely out of concern for education. City officials placed Austin's only black public schools in this zone, and this all but guaranteed that African-American families with children would relocate to the district. The schools in east Austin became the community's most celebrated feature during the mid-twentieth century, and African-American educators were regarded as the community's venerated professionals (Rivera & Rivera, 2012).

However, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, many African-American parents in east Austin began to lose confidence in the public school system that they believed was undercutting the quality of education in local schools. In their view, schools in east Austin were underachieving because they were largely under-resourced, especially when

compared to Austin's other public schools (E. Tang, personal communication, April 21, 2014).

The concerns of these residents are supported by research carried out by Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP), which discovered private fundraising accounts for hundreds of thousands of dollars across Austin Independent School District (AISD) schools (TCRP, 2012). Schools in wealthier areas have vastly superior resources. The budget disparities are due to an AISD policy that allows

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parent associations to privately fundraise—without limit—for individual campuses. Schools in higher income areas consistently benefit from a discretionary private fund. They can subsidize or fully fund additional staff, supplemental programs, extracurricular activities, and a range of other campus improvements.

The data collected by the TCRP prompts the question: were African-American families lured away from Austin by the prospect of their children and grandchildren receiving a more equitable education in public school districts outside of Austin's city limits? Here, again, additional research is needed to answer this question.



EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Austin's drivers of economic growth are technology, the service economy, and construction. However, African Americans are not well represented in these areas. For example, researchers at the Radio-Television-Film Department at the University of Texas at Austin have demonstrated the extent to which the booming Austin "technopolis"—the city is home to major technology companies and numerous tech startups—has left behind the city's poorest residents, most of whom are African American and Latino (Straubhaar, Spence, Tufekci, & Lentz, 2012). They discovered that these underserved populations have a difficult time accessing technology training, and their opportunities for employment in the technology industry were severely limited when compared to other racial groups.

Meanwhile, the growing service economy and the glut of new residential and commercial construction in Austin relies primarily on an immigrant workforce,

particularly undocumented laborers from Latin America. Employers favor these workers over non-immigrants and because of their precarious immigration status they are viewed as more pliable than the non-immigrant workforce—they work longer hours at lower wages and are deemed less likely to stand up to employers (Workers Defense Project, 2009). This might explain why Austin has both low unemployment and high poverty, as many of those employed in Austin are Latinos who fit the classic definition of the working poor.

Moreover, the ethnic immigrant network doubles as a labor network within a given industrial niche. When a particular group begins to dominate the labor pool in a certain trade (e.g., roofing, foundation work, etc.), it becomes increasingly difficult for those outside that race or ethnic group to break into that labor network (Waldinger, 1996). African-American workers make up only 5% of the Austin construction industry (Workers Defense Project, 2009).

CONCLUSION

There is no single explanation for the decline in Austin's African-American population between 2000 and 2010. The goal of this issues brief, and the future installments of this series, is to bring to light the multiple and embedded factors that have contributed to this decline. This is our first step towards proposing meaningful policy recommendations.

In the subsequent installments of this series, we will take up the structural inequalities outlined above in greater detail. These inequalities are certainly not unique to Austin, nor are they entirely new to its African-American community. However, we postulate that between 2000 and 2010 they both intensified and converged, resulting in Austin's outlier status.



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