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Monday, Sep 09, 2002

Posted on Wed,
Sep. 04, 2002**The Beacon Journal**

For richer, for poorer, it's Akron
**Census says wealthiest areas are Fairlawn Heights and Merriman.
 Poverty soars near downtown**
 By Paula Schleis and Katie Byard
 Beacon Journal staff writers

Water sprinklers feed lush lawns in front of stately homes along Merriman Road. Sweeping willows and ancient oaks shade the homesteads that make up the densest concentration of wealth in the city.

Along North Street, the lawns amount to small patches of grass. Here, most residents live in the city's oldest public housing, their red-brick row houses resting 100 feet below the All-America Bridge.

Two miles separate Merriman from North, but by most measurements they are worlds apart. One enjoys a median household income of \$86,000, more than twice the state average. In the other, households get by on \$7,000 a year.

Up until now, the 2000 U.S. Census has been a story of cities, of states, of a country with 281 million people.

But new data released today demonstrate the power of the census to zoom in and give us a glimpse into areas as small as a few blocks with a couple of hundred homes. When Akron is divided into its 236 census block groups, Merriman and North become its poles.

However, the Akron we know isn't defined so narrowly. Piece together a few block = [100.0]groups and you begin to recognize our neighborhoods.

Firestone Park. Highland Square. Goodyear Heights. North Hill. Kenmore.

Akron has 21 distinctive neighborhoods, and it's at this level our portrait of Akron -- who lives here, with what kind of income, in what sort of home -- emerges.

Wealthiest sections

If you live in Akron, moving up means finding a place in the city's northwest quadrant.

Fairlawn Heights, Northwest Akron (which includes the wealthy Merriman Road block group) and Merriman Valley are the only three in

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Akron to exceed Ohio's median household income of \$40,956.

Throw in neighboring Wallhaven, and you have the only areas exceeding the state's \$103,700 median for home values.

Like many of us, Andy Imperial once drove through the streets that were home to Akron's rubber barons and thought, "Someday, I want to live there."

About 40 years ago, he and his wife, Margie, did just that. The 78-year-old former business owner lives in a Tudor-style home on a leafy street with friendly neighbors, not far from the Stan Hywet mansion and popular Sand Run Park.

That the trail of money leads to the northwest didn't surprise Jerry Egan, Akron's comprehensive planning administrator.

What he didn't expect to learn was that the city's three wealthiest neighborhoods lost significant buying power in the 1990s.

When adjusted for inflation, the median household income dropped 15 percent in Fairlawn Heights, 8 percent in Northwest Akron and 19 percent in Merriman Valley -- at a time when the city and state had a 10 percent increase.

"Wow. That's counter-intuitive," Egan said. "I'm not sure what's going on there."

In Fairlawn Heights' case, age could be a factor. One in five residents is at least 65.

In Merriman Valley's case, the 1990s saw the addition of the 400-unit Waterford apartment complex on Portage Trail Extension, which is restricted to low- and moderate-income families. "That certainly could have an impact on the figures," Egan said.

Impoverished areas

Typical of large cities, the most impoverished neighborhoods are at or near the city's core.

More than 40 percent of those living in downtown Akron and the adjoining University of Akron neighborhood fall below the poverty line. Summit Lake, Lane-Wooster and East Akron aren't far behind.

The cheapest housing stock is in Middlebury, where the median home value is just over \$44,000. That's followed by the University of Akron area (\$49,000) and the Lane-Wooster neighborhood (\$50,000.)

But those who had the least also had the most to gain, and to them the 1990s were good.

While the city's median household income jumped 10 percent, Middlebury saw its income rise 39 percent and its home values grow by 42 percent, adjusted for inflation.

Elizabeth Park Valley (which includes the poorest block group under the All-America Bridge) had a 26 percent income gain and a 59 percent increase in home values.

The largest leap in home values came in the third-poorest neighborhood in Akron. Summit Lake's median home value jumped 114 percent, adjusted for inflation, to \$53,925.

In Summit Lake and Elizabeth Park's case, city planner Egan noted the impact of "flipping" in the 1990s -- speculators buying homes in poorer

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neighborhoods, putting a little work into them and inflating the prices. But he noted the city's effort to improve housing stock in some of the most blighted areas.

Egan said the next big change could take place in Elizabeth Park Valley, where Akron Metropolitan Housing Authority hopes to get a \$20 million grant to tear down the old subsidized units and replace them with a much nicer and less-dense housing complex.

That would rest well with Virginia Coleman, who's already doing her part to brighten up the neighborhood. The 79-year-old community activist maintains a pretty home with gingerbread trim and colorful gardens while also tending to a vacant lot across the street where a donated gazebo has become the community centerpiece.

"The valley, the trees, the layout of the land -- it's gorgeous," Coleman says of her neighborhood. "I think eventually it's going to be a place where people will want to come to live."

Interesting statistics

The census data tell more about Akron than just its money:

"The greatest concentration of nuclear families can be found in Fairlawn Heights, where nearly one in four homes has a mom, dad and kids. But the most kids can be found at Summit Lake, where more than one in three residents are younger than 18.

"When new people move here from out of state, where do they go? Apparently Wallhaven, where 12 percent of the residents did not live in Ohio in 1995.

"The city's oldest housing stock is concentrated in Middlebury and South Akron, where the median year that homes were built is 1940. The freshest sawdust is in Merriman Valley, where the median is 1982.

"At 89 percent, no one is close to Fairlawn Heights when it comes to home ownership. Outside of downtown Akron and the University of Akron, where you would expect to find most folks renting, the fewest home owners can be found in the Summit Lake and Middlebury areas.

"For the greatest proportion of high school graduates, look to Northwest Akron, where 95 percent of adults have a tassel to hang from their rearview mirror. In downtown Akron and Summit Lake, more than a third of adults never took that walk across the stage.

"Fairlawn Heights edged out Northwest Akron for bachelor's degrees, at 57 percent. Only 3 percent of those living in the Summit Lake and Lane-Wooster neighborhoods finished a four-year program.

Black and white

The Lane-Wooster neighborhood has seen some improvements in recent years.

The Wooster branch of the Akron-Summit County Public Library has been expanded, some middle-income housing has sprouted up along some streets, the athletic complex has been renovated, and the nearby Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts is a shining star in the public school system.

But there's one thing that hasn't changed. Lane-Wooster has the highest concentration of black residents in the city, at 87 percent.

Across the street from the library, Erick Jones, an assistant technician at

L.J. Audio, said there's nothing wrong with a neighborhood being predominantly black. At the same time, he wouldn't mind seeing it become more integrated.

``We (black and white) came together with the 9/11 attacks," he said. ``I feel we should all keep coming together."

The opposite extreme of Lane-Wooster is Ellet, where 94 percent of the residents are white.

Michelle Risor, 30, who is black, said she and her husband moved to Ellet from a Cleveland suburb. Only after they moved in did they realize there weren't many minorities in the area.

While she admitted that ``every now and then I feel a little outnumbered," she said her neighbors were quick to introduce themselves and make them feel welcomed.

``It's an all-American neighborhood that you hope and pray you get into. You just can't find it anymore," she said.

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