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# THOSE WHO LEFT

## Austin's Declining African American Population

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Despite being one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, Austin's African American population has been in steady decline for nearly two decades. The discrepancy between Austin's huge population growth and its decline in African American residents is greater than that of any other fast-growing major city in the U.S. Why are they leaving and where are they going?

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### Executive Summary

Although Austin is one of the fastest growing major cities in the United States, its African American population has been in steady decline for nearly two decades. From 2000 to 2010 African Americans were the only racial group in Austin to experience an absolute numerical decline during a decade of otherwise remarkable growth in the city's general population. Moreover, no other fast-growing major city experienced a decline in African Americans during that same decade.

Historically, the concentration of African American residents in East Austin was the result of state-sanctioned segregation. In 1928, city officials created a "Negro District" in which the majority of African Americans would eventually resettle because it was home to the only public school and other public services accessible to them under the racial rule of Jim Crow. Decades later these very neighborhoods would become prime targets of gentrification. Concentrated segregation followed by concentrated gentrification resulted in the massive displacement of African Americans from their historic communities.

What caused this population decline? How are those who have resettled outside of Austin fairing? This report explores these questions and, through the voices of displaced African American families, focuses on two primary forces that have led to the decline in Austin's African American population: unaffordable housing and dissatisfaction with the city's public schools.

### Background

In 2014 the Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis published the issue brief "Outlier: The Case of Austin's Declining African American Population," which drew upon decennial U.S. census data to reveal Austin's rapid decline in African American residents. Austin grew by 20.4 percent between 2000 and 2010 and was the third-fastest growing city in a list of 10 total cities including Charlotte, Fort Worth, and Portland, among others. However, despite the city's huge growth in general population, its African American population declined by 5.4 percent, from

64,259 African American residents to 60,760. Austin was the statistical outlier, being the only major-growing city to see a such a significant loss in African American residents.

The initial brief only hypothesized factors that contributed to African Americans leaving. These included the historical racial segregation due to the city's "Negro District" followed by the contemporary gentrification of those neighborhoods, Austin public schools underserving African American students, the unequal treatment of African Americans by Austin police, and the lack of employment opportunities for African Americans in Austin's booming economy. By invoking these historical, economic, and social pressures, the authors speculated that "African Americans did not choose to leave Austin so much as they were compelled to leave."

Building off of the initial brief, this report presents data that explores two major topics related to the population decline.

One, did African Americans choose to leave the city in pursuit of better opportunities elsewhere? Or were they compelled or forced to leave, and why? That is, were they "pushed out" by socioeconomic pressures, particularly the gentrification of historically African American neighborhoods and the simultaneous soaring cost of housing throughout the entire city?

And two, to what extent is the resettlement of African Americans to areas outside of Austin an extension of inequalities they have faced when living within the city? The report also touches upon the social, political, and economical significance of this decline.

## Methodology In Surveying Those Who Left

Surveys were conducted with 100 African Americans, a majority of whom moved out of the city of Austin between 1999 (the year the 2000 census was taken) and the present. These respondents relocated outside of Austin's city limits to nearby cities, specifically Round Rock, Pflugerville, Del Valle, Bastrop, Elgin, and Manor, yet all of them maintain close ties to family, friends, businesses, and places of worship located within the city of Austin.

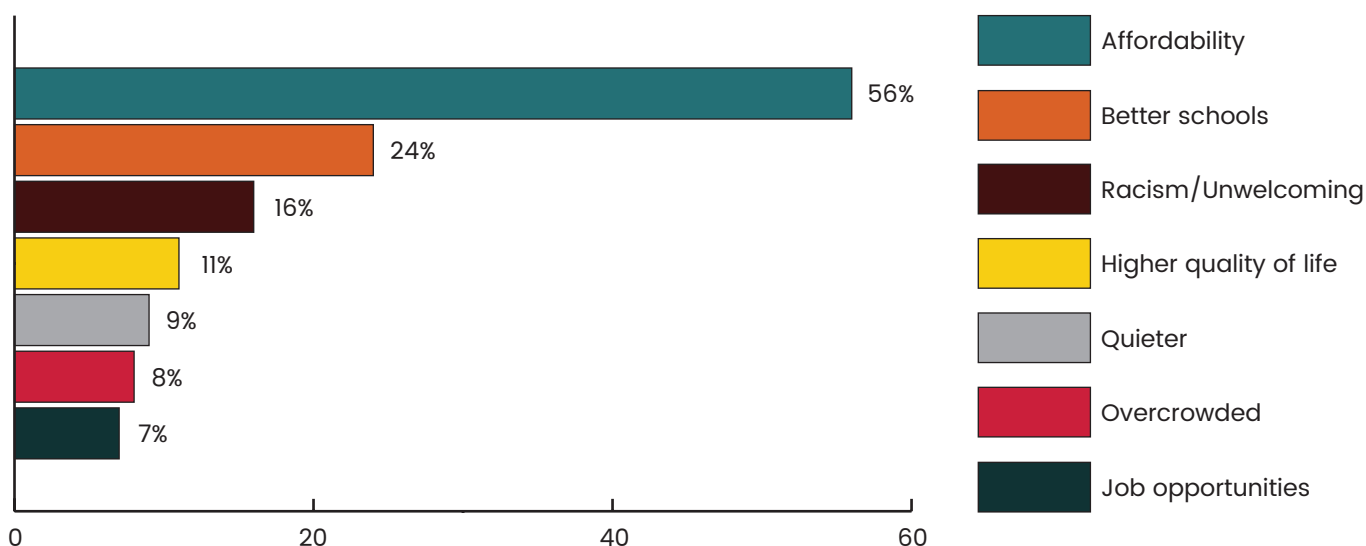
The majority of the surveys were conducted at one of three historic African American churches located within Austin's erstwhile "Negro District." These included Greater Mount Zion Baptist Church, St. James Missionary Baptist Church, and David Chapel. Additionally, an approximate 10 percent of the surveys were conducted at St. Mary Missionary Baptist Church in Pflugerville. With the assistance of leaders from each of these churches, the survey team was able to identify respondents among congregants who now live outside the city limits yet return to East Austin to attend services.

All respondents identified as African Americans consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau's "Black Population alone" definition and as heads of household. Men made up 36 percent of respondents with the other 64 percent being women. The age of respondents ranged from 19 years to 79 years, with 52 years old being the average age. Income of respondents ranged from \$12,000 to \$200,000, with an average income of \$58,540. Fifteen percent of the respondents moved out of Austin before 1999, 53 percent moved out between 1999 and 2009, and 23 percent left Austin between 2009 and present day. Before leaving the city limits, 63 percent of the respondents lived in the greater East Austin area.

"Cost of living was getting too high in Austin and I get more for my money in Round Rock."

-Female, 52

## Top reasons for leaving Austin, all respondents



### Key Findings and Discussion

#### PRICED OUT OF AUSTIN

The 2014 IUPRA issue brief speculated that African Americans left Austin because housing costs within the city became increasingly unaffordable. It specifically highlighted the pressure that gentrification placed on longstanding residents of East Austin, home to the largest concentration of the city's African American population.

The survey data presented in this report strongly support this theory. When asked why they decided to leave Austin, 56 percent of respondents chose “unaffordable housing” as their leading reason. Among the respondents, 63 percent lived in greater East Austin before leaving the city. This suggests that soaring housing prices incentivized many African American homeowners of East Austin to sell their properties to higher-income residents who could afford to renovate homes in disrepair and to pay hefty property taxes. When these longstanding African American residents searched for new homes, they decided to purchase or rent outside of the city limits where housing prices were more affordable and where they could get more equity in their homes (Castillo, 2011).

What respondents had to say about affordability:

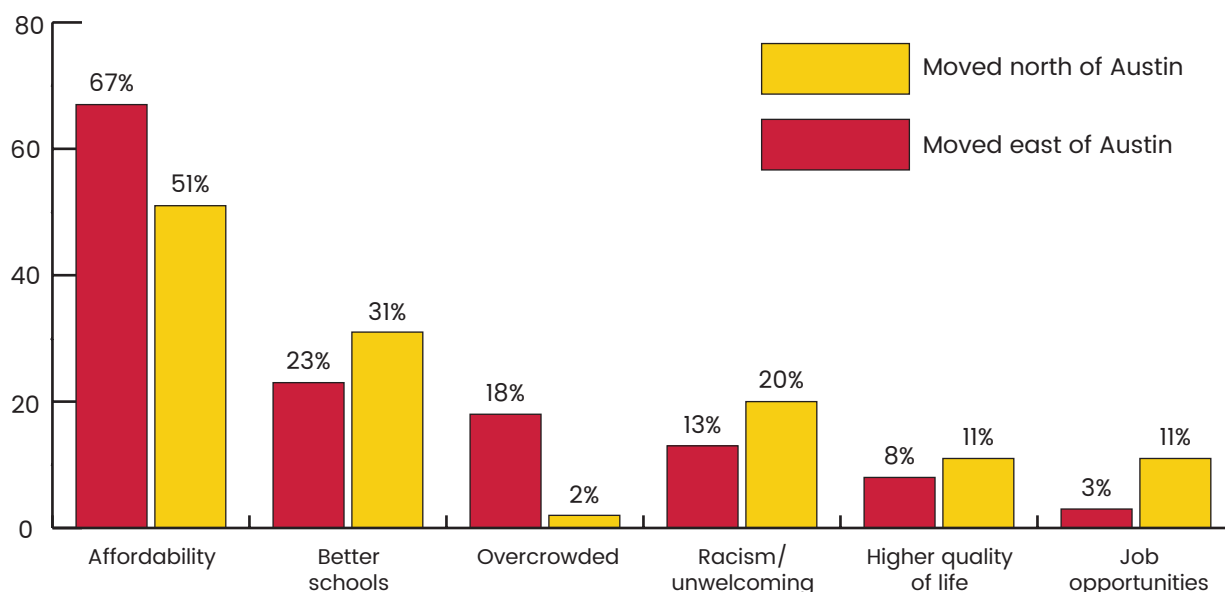
- “I couldn’t afford to live here; pushed out by lack of resources” -Female, 52
- “They didn’t want to redo East Austin when we were living in it. We saw what was happening in Austin. They were trying to get all the property in Austin they could get. City was taking land, jacking up prices. The gentrification started settling in. Residents are sick to their stomach seeing what they see. They could have revitalized.” -Male, 63

#### EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

According to the City of Austin’s demographer, the 5.4 percent decline in African American residents between 2000 and 2010 was comprised mostly of those under the age of 18. One infers from this that African American heads of household based their decision to move out on the needs of their children, specifically on their educational needs. The survey data confirm this theory.

Twenty-four percent of all respondents cited that their children’s education and the need for “better schools” as a reason for moving

## Top reasons for leaving Austin, respondents who moved east vs. north



out. This was the second leading reason given by respondents, and it underscores the extent to which moves were not based solely on economic pressures. Beyond the issue of housing affordability, African American residents were responding to a particular social inequality. They believed that East Austin public schools, which are among the most segregated in the region, were underserving their children. This sentiment was particularly true among those who moved north. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents who moved north rated their current access to quality public schools “good to very good.” This was a substantial increase from the 60 percent who rated their access to Austin public schools as “good to very good.” Those who moved east also believed that their access to quality public schools improved once they moved outside of Austin. After moving out, the percentage of those who rated their access “good to very good” rose from 60 to 69 percent.

What respondents had to say about moving out for better educational opportunities:

- *“Better schools. AISD is bad. I left because of the schools.”* -Female, 42

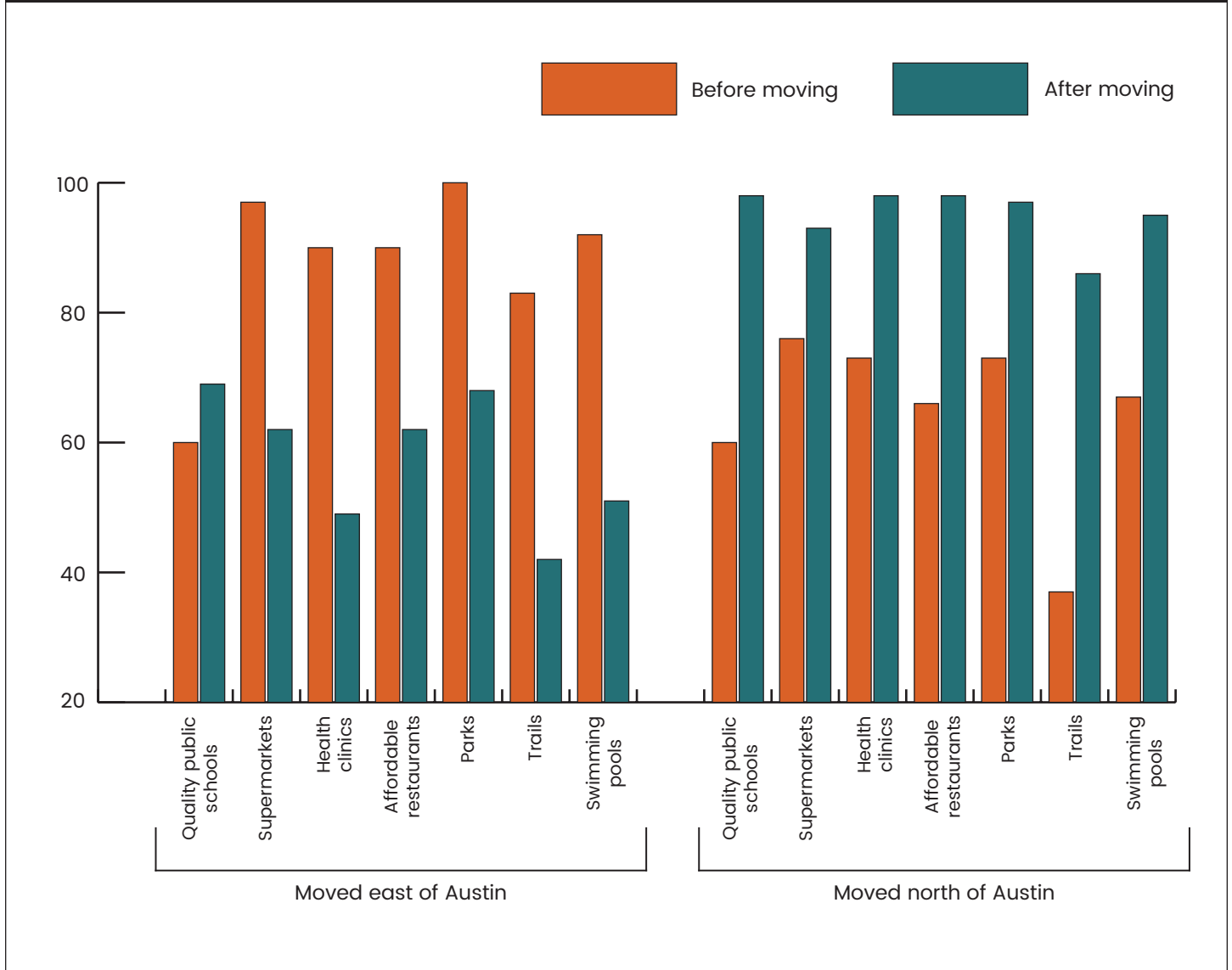
- *“The quality of schools, if it wasn’t for that I would have loved to live in Austin.”* Male, 49
- *“The school district at Del Valle is much better...”* -Female, 46

### DIMINISHED ACCESS FOR THOSE WHO MOVED EAST

On average, respondents claimed to have diminished access to key institutions and public amenities and services after moving outside of Austin. However, their answers skewed sharply depending on where they moved. The majority of those who moved east of the city believed their access to these institutions and amenities diminished considerably while the majority of those who moved north believed that their access greatly improved.

Of those who moved east, 49 percent rated their present access to health clinics as “good to very good.” By contrast, 90 percent of these respondents rated their previous access to Austin health clinics as “good to very good.” This dramatic percentage difference suggests that those who moved east have experienced a significant decline in their access to health care in recent years.

## Good access to various amenities, before moving vs. after moving



Similarly, 62 percent of respondents who moved east gave a positive rating to their present access to supermarkets. Again, this is a considerable drop from the 97 percent who gave a positive rating for their access to supermarkets when they lived within Austin.

The majority of respondents who moved east also reported having better access to public parks, trails, and pools when they lived in Austin compared to their access to these amenities today. When comparing their past and present degrees of access for each of these public amenities, the percentage difference in positive ratings was an average of 34 percent in favor of past access.

The majority of residents who now live north, however, believe their access to health clinics,

supermarkets, and public amenities improved considerably since moving out of Austin. The north includes economically developed cities with large tax bases, such as Pflugerville and Round Rock. On the contrary, the east is home to cities (some of them unincorporated) which contain residential areas that are economically marginalized and geographically isolated. These are pockets in which poverty and unemployment are more prevalent than they are within Austin and cities directly north of Austin (Fernandez, et al, 2013). One infers from this that residents who live east are experiencing the “suburbanization of poverty” phenomenon. During the first decade of the 21st century, suburbs of the largest metropolitan areas in the country were home to the fastest growing

“I feel like no one sees me. They don’t value that I’m there. They only notice me when there’s a problem. Thousands of Black kids who don’t get the same appreciation that a pet gets.”

-Male, 44

populations of poor people (Kneebone & Garr, 2010). The Austin metropolitan statistical area was no exception (Castillo & Taboada, 2013).

Considering that clinics, supermarkets, parks, trails, and pools are all essential to the holistic health of residents, those who experienced diminished access to these institutions and amenities are likely to experience poorer health outcomes, pointing to yet another dimension of the suburbanization of poverty: the concentration of disease and higher rates of mortality in the suburbs. Statistics from the Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department bear this out: as poverty grows in the eastern region, so too does the rate of those who have been diagnosed with cancer, diabetes, and heart disease (Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department, 2012).

#### THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Compounding the racial inequalities they faced in the housing market and public schools, an additional 16 percent of all respondents stated that institutional racism played a role in their decision to move out of Austin. According to

these respondents Austin was “unwelcoming” to African Americans. They pointed to various forms of institutional racism to bolster their claims, specifically the discrimination they faced when dealing with public schools, businesses, municipal agencies, and the police. On average, 43 percent of respondents claimed that they had a negative past relationship with the Austin police. This negative rating dropped to 35 percent when they assessed their relationship to police in their current cities. Although none of the respondents stated that police officers outside of Austin treated them any better than their Austin counterparts, the relatively high negative rating they gave to Austin police underscores their sentiment that Austin was unwelcoming to African Americans.

What respondents had to say about institutional racism in Austin:

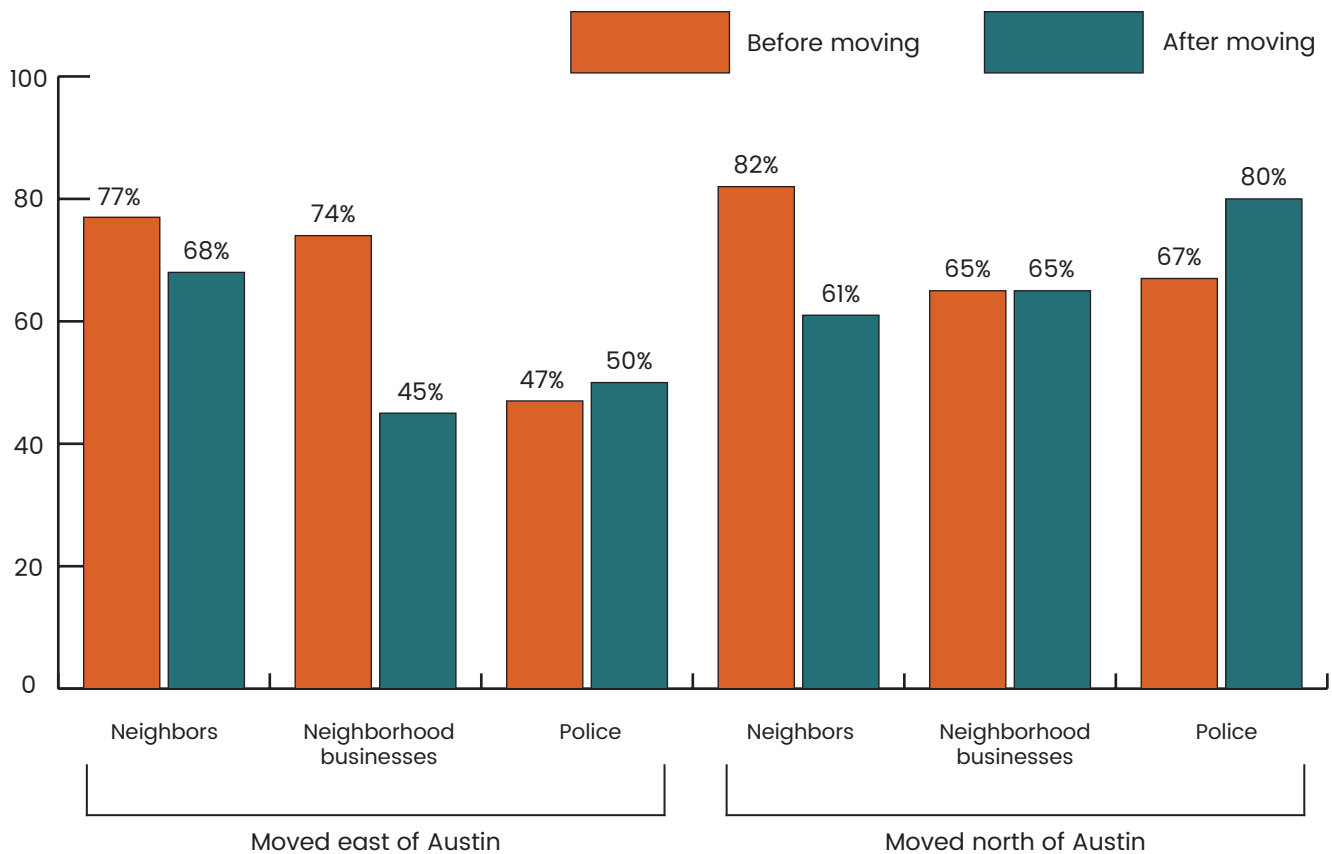
- *“Racial divide. They wanted us out.”* -Female, 63
- *“Austin has never been openly friendly to African Americans or allowed them to develop a significant economic enclave. Austin has an antagonistic atmosphere to African Americans. For example, the Texas Relays. Austin is unwelcoming. It’s a blatant slap in the face.”* -Female, 46

#### Implications of Findings and the Myth of “Black Flight”

The decline in Austin’s African American population has social, political, economical, and health implications for the residents who left. Those who moved east are further marginalized because of their diminished access to necessary services, which can lead to poor health outcomes and a higher mortality rate. They also experience a lower quality of life having been forced out of the city they historically have called home.

“White Flight” names the postwar phenomenon wherein primarily white middle class families moved from inner cities to suburbs to avoid contact with poorer African American residents and to avail themselves of a perceived higher quality of life. A closer look reveals that the factors behind African American outmigration run

## Good relationships, respondents who moved east vs. north



completely contrary to White Flight because they had less of a choice than their White counterparts in leaving the inner cities.

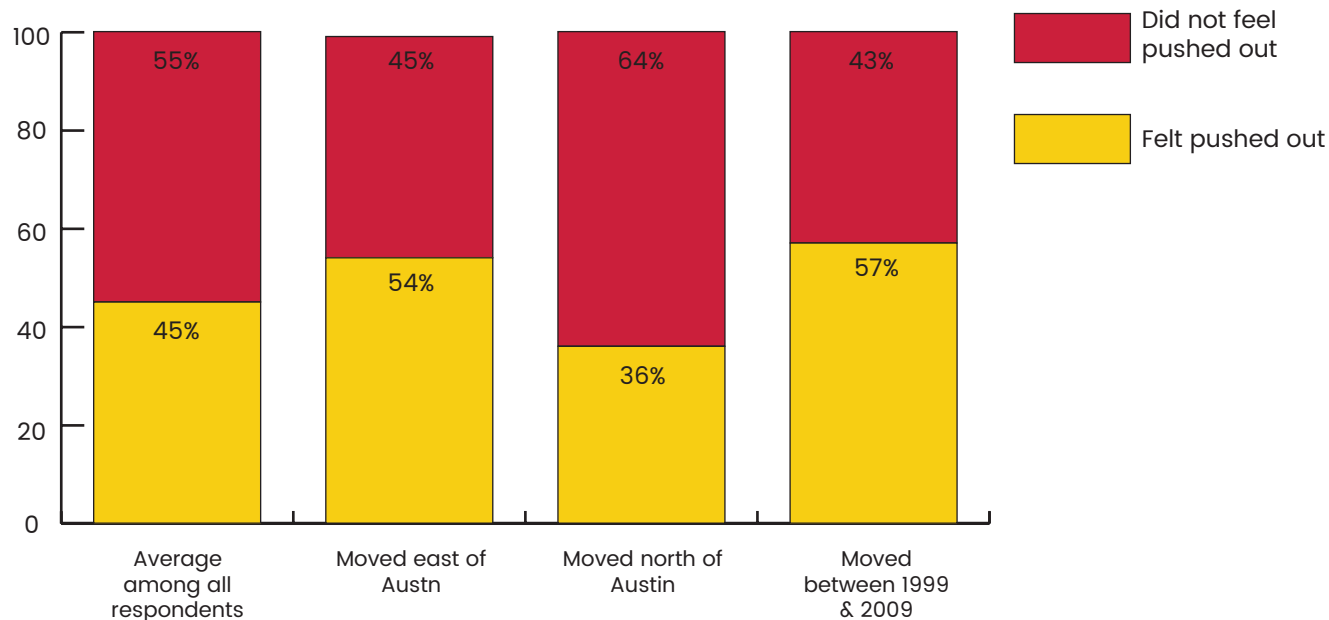
The majority of African Americans who moved out of Austin had positive relationships with the neighbors they left behind. Eighty percent of respondents rated their relationships with previous neighbors in Austin positively while only 66 percent rated their relationship to current neighbors in the suburbs positively. The data suggest that the majority of respondents believe their move to the suburbs—both to the east and to the north—resulted in a loss of social and communal relations.

This, along with the lack of choice many felt about moving, may explain why only 11 percent equated their move to the suburbs with a “higher quality of life.” In the view of most respondents, outmigration was not an act of social mobility reminiscent of White Flight, but one of social sacrifice. They moved out, but not necessarily up.

## Conclusion: Would They Come Back?

When asked if they would ever move back to Austin, more respondents say yes than no, with a percentage answering maybe. Of those who moved east, 43 percent said they would move back if housing was more affordable. That percentage was slightly higher at 48 percent among those who moved north. The relatively high percentage of yes responses from northern residents is notable because these very respondents also claimed to have improved access to public education, health clinics, supermarkets, and public amenities after they moved out of Austin. This suggests that respondents continue to feel an ineluctable sense of rootedness to Austin, even when they are satisfied with their new environs. The sense of history, culture, and belonging that respondents feel for Austin neighborhoods in which they grew up and in which their families have lived for generations is irreplaceable.

## Percentage of those who felt pushed out of Austin



What respondents had to say about whether or not they would ever move back:

- *"I wish I could. I was born and raised in Austin, it's just not affordable."* -Female, 57, moved north
- *"If I could afford it, tomorrow."* -Female, 55, moved east
- *"Yes, because it's home. I love Austin."* -Female, 43, moved north

While the lack of affordable housing affects a large cross section of Austin's working and middle classes, it has had a disproportionate impact on African Americans of greater East Austin, an area which has undergone a high rate of gentrification.

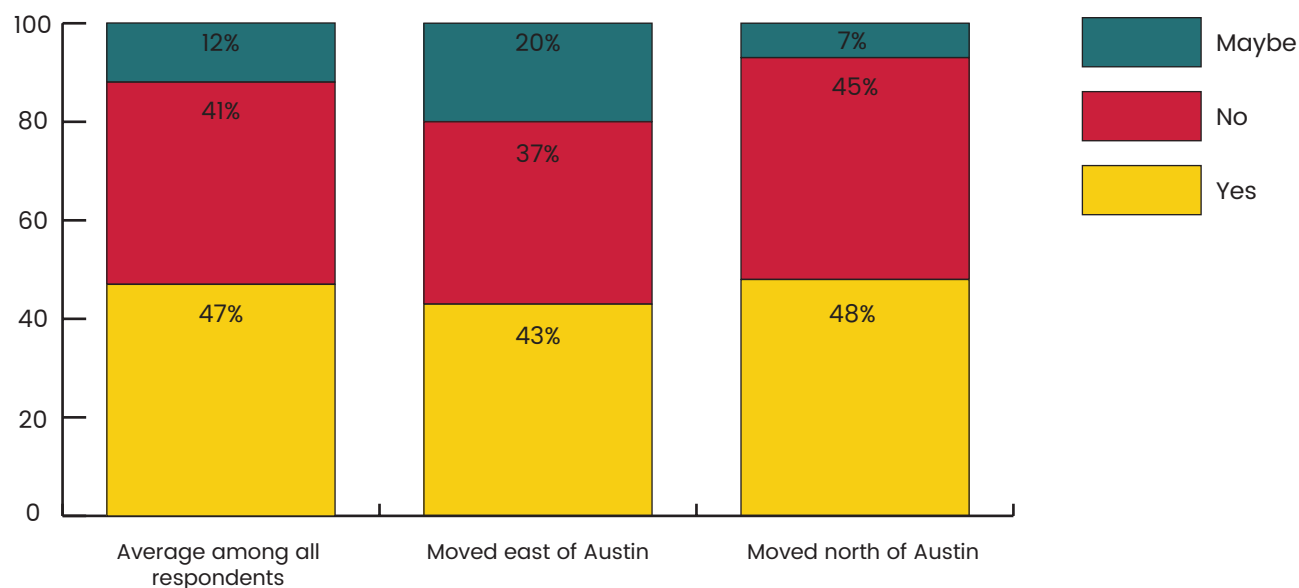
A striking 45 percent of all respondents identified strongly with the statement "I was pushed out of Austin." Among those who moved east—where incomes are lower and poverty rates higher—that number increased to 54 percent. Among respondents who moved out specifically between 1999 and 2009, the percentage of those who feel pushed out rose to 57 percent. These data

points become more significant when we consider that African Americans who have experienced state-sanctioned racism—Jim Crow laws, racially restricted covenants, bank redlining—have a very distinct (some might say literal) understanding of what it means to be forced in and out of neighborhoods, public spaces, and schools. They do not take the term "pushed out" lightly, and hence many were hesitant to use it to describe the market pressures that led them to move. Despite this hesitancy, a high percentage of respondents still reported feeling pushed out.

There are some who have argued that the declining number of African Americans within the city limits is irrelevant so long as this population continues to grow within the metropolitan statistical area. Implied here is that city boundaries, and hence, political and economic jurisdictions, are arbitrary. The data presented in this report rebuts this line of thinking. Respondents pointed to the unassailable differences between living within and outside of Austin. Those who were pushed east of the city now have limited access to health care,



## Percentage of those who would move back to Austin



supermarkets, and vital public amenities. Many of them live in economically and geographically marginalized locations. Their lack of access is emblematic of the suburbanization of poverty. Meanwhile, the majority of all respondents, including those who have ample access to institutions and amenities, have suffered social losses because they are now disconnected from family and community networks which sustained them for generations. It comes as little surprise that the majority of all respondents said that they would return to Austin if housing prices in the city were affordable. City boundaries, far from being arbitrary, serve as a line of demarcation between those who have access to services and connection to communal networks and those who do not.

The prospects of their return appear slim. Between 2011 and 2014 the median home price in East Austin's zip code 78702 tripled from \$125,000 to \$375,000 (Solomon, 2015). This points to the deeper significance of fewer African Americans in Austin: having been pushed out of their historic neighborhoods and into the suburbs, they were

replaced by higher income residents who converted once undervalued East Austin properties into new sources of wealth. In turn, the lower-to-middle income residents of East Austin began populating outlying areas. In this way, gentrification begets economic segregation: high incomes and wealth are concentrated in pockets of the city and poverty is concentrated in surrounding suburbs. According to some researchers, the Austin metropolitan area is now the most economically segregated in the nation (Badger, 2015). Recent research also reveals that the more racially and economically segregated a metro area, the less economically mobile its entire population, particularly its younger residents (Chetty & Hendren, 2016). The lack of opportunities for future generations threatens the long-term economic health of these metropolitan areas. African American outmigration serves as a bellwether for the rest of the Austin area. Any efforts to stem African American population losses will no doubt contribute to creating a more economically and socially equitable city.

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