

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND
HISPANIC COMMUNITIES IN
EAST PALO ALTO



April 2003

African American and Hispanic Communities in East Palo Alto is published by Wildflowers Institute, 1144 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco, California 94133-4212, 415.775.1151. Entire contents © 2003 Wildflowers Institute, except book excerpts or quotations from other copyrighted materials. All rights reserved. Material in this publication may not be reproduced in any form without express permission.

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC COMMUNITIES IN EAST PALO ALTO

Carilee Pang Chen

INTRODUCTION

Located at the southeastern tip of San Mateo County, East Palo Alto is a young city along the San Francisco Bay. Incorporated in 1983, its city boundaries surround 2.5 square miles of land. Despite its small size and young age, the city has a vibrant multicultural history that reflects the complex dynamics between core and interface cultures in the community. The diversity of East Palo Alto is very different now than a decade ago. For decades, African Americans were the largest ethnic group, but today, 60% of the city's population is Hispanic. With this shift in population, new issues have emerged for the different generations and ethnic and racial groups in the community. How these groups come together to help all individuals and families lead a productive and meaningful life in the city of East Palo Alto is the work of the people and their leaders.

This report provides background on some of the changes in the ethnic and racial population of East Palo Alto through an overview of the city's multicultural history and an analysis of demographic data for two of the largest ethnic groups in East Palo Alto, African Americans and Hispanics.

Key Moments in East Palo Alto's Multicultural History

– Excerpts from “A History of East Palo Alto” by Rhonda Rigenhagen¹

1950s and 1960s: Blockbusting

In the 1950s, the demographics of East Palo Alto were dramatically altered through a practice commonly referred to as “blockbusting.” At that time, discrimination and restrictions barred people of color from buying homes in many areas. Area committees, aiming to break segregation barriers, frequently helped African American families purchase homes by using a white “front” person. East Palo Alto was a focus area because prices were lower and residents were more tolerant than in other cities.

But not everyone involved in desegregation had unselfish motives. A 1963 article in the *Menlo Park Recorder* describes blockbusting as an aggressive, targeted real estate promotion that typically began after a Black family moved into a white neighborhood. Real estate agents—either

1. Rhonda Rigenhagen, “A History of East Palo Alto,” written for East Palo Alto's 10th anniversary on July 1, 1993, <http://www.romic.com/epahistory/frame.htm>.

initiating the original sale or merely taking advantage of it—went door to door and convinced residents their property would be devalued by thousands of dollars if they didn't sell immediately. Agents responsible for relocating African Americans displaced by redevelopment in San Francisco offered free bus rides to East Palo Alto. This maneuver had the dual purpose of attracting new buyers and alarming potential sellers. Agents also often arranged for a Caucasian proxy to buy homes cheaply from the panicked sellers, and then quickly resold the houses to African Americans at a much higher price. The threatened drop in prices never occurred.

1960s and 1970s: Municipal Council

As an unincorporated area, East Palo Alto was governed by the county. Residents complained that they had no say in decisions that affected them, so in 1966 county supervisors established the East Palo Alto Municipal Council. Although it was an advisory body, the county nearly always followed its recommendations. The council was made up of one representative from each of the five districts of East Palo Alto, but members were elected by all voters.

“To our knowledge, this is the first program of this nature in the United States,” San Mateo Legal Aid official Bruce Bailey was quoted in the *Review of the News* in 1968. “East Palo Alto is an ideal community for this experiment in incorporation and self-government of a minority area.”

The council began meeting in a storefront in the University Village Shopping Center, found new chambers on Pulgas Avenue in 1971, and then moved into the county government center in 1975. Among those who served on the council was Willia Gray, later honored as the nation's first Black woman mayor.

In 1968 an election was held to rename East Palo Alto. Several alternatives were considered, including “Uhuru” and “Kenyatta,” before “Nairobi” was settled upon. The measure however was defeated by a ratio of more than 2 to 1. At the time, the greatest support for the name change came from the 18- to 21-year-old age group. It was believed that if the voting age had been 18, East Palo Alto would be known as Nairobi today.

One of the frustrations of not being incorporated was the number of special districts to which residents paid taxes for such services as drainage, fire protection, garbage, sanitation, lighting, recreation, water, education, etc. According to one source, East Palo Alto fell under the jurisdiction of 37 special districts in the mid-1960s. Consolidation of these districts and their services was one of the arguments used to support incorporation.

1970s and 1980s: Alternative Schools and Ethnocentric Education

Nearly 650 students attended Ravenswood High School when it opened in 1958. Originally, its pupils were predominantly white, but by 1969, 87% of the student body was African American. Voluntary busing two years later brought an almost equal racial balance to the school, which closed in 1975.

In 1966 Gertrude Wilks launched an alternative approach that was designed to improve educational opportunities for East Palo Alto children. Some 75 students participated in the so-called “sneakout,” staying with families in Palo Alto and Los Altos four days a week in order to attend local schools in the two districts. This prompted other families to accomplish the same ends by using false addresses to enroll their children. Illegal at the time, interdistrict transfers later became a legitimate option.

Other African Americans dissatisfied with mainstream education turned to alternative schools that focused on Black pride, identity, and achievement. The first was the EPA Day School, founded in 1966 by Wilks and Mothers for Equal Education. It began by holding Saturday

classes in a local church. Enrollment jumped to 300 its second year, and classes expanded to Wednesday evenings.

After the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the school evolved into Nairobi High School and Nairobi Elementary School. It taught 500 students five days a week in two buildings on Runnymede Street. The schools endured until the 1980s despite threats, bomb scares, and the fact that both buildings fell victim to suspected arson and Wilks' own home was torched.

Nairobi College was established by Bob Hoover in 1969 "to meet the needs of people of color." The two-year private school began with 120 students, and grew to 200 by 1971. In 1970 it opened a second campus in Redwood City. Called *Venceremos* (*We Shall Overcome*), the school was intended to serve primarily Hispanic students. It had a student body of 200 when it split from Nairobi a year later, and then closed in 1974. Nairobi College ceased teaching in 1981.

A latter-day Afrocentric school, Shule Mandela Academy, opened in 1981 and still operates today.

1983: Incorporation

East Palo Alto's battle to achieve cityhood was a long and tumultuous one. Incorporation was proposed as early as 1931 and again four years later. The idea was revived in 1951. A study was done by the Ravenswood-Willow Boosters, which voted 38-29 against incorporation amid charges the meeting was packed with anti-city members.

In the fall of 1953 civic leaders formed a committee to study incorporation. The effort died in early 1954, following a near riot of 400 people at a meeting at Brentwood School. In the summer of 1958 residents living west of the Bayshore freeway attempted to incorporate themselves into a city to be called Woodland Oaks. At the same time an effort was made to incorporate the east side into Menlo Park. Both attempts failed. In 1981 the area west of Bayshore again applied for annexation to Menlo Park and was denied.

Residents, both pro and con, were deeply divided on the issue. But supporters of incorporation persisted, arguing that incorporation offered the promise of the following:

- Direct control over planning, zoning, and land use
- Direct control over how and where funds were spent
- Better leverage and organization in obtaining funds
- Improved level of services to residents
- Consolidation of services being provided by numerous special districts
- Elected officials who would be more accountable to local residents
- Improved community focus, identity, and power

A consultant's draft report, prepared for the county in 1980, stated that incorporation was not economically feasible and endorsed annexation to Menlo Park. Its findings were contested by the municipal government.

The final report said incorporation, under certain conditions, would best fulfill the town's economic and community development needs. "Incorporation will focus the authority, the responsibility, and the tools that are currently available to accomplish community development in a single, politically visible entity—the new City Council."

Pro-city supporters filed papers in the spring of 1981, seeking to put the issue on the November ballot. This final, successful effort to incorporate would not be resolved for six years. The county delayed an election until studies could be completed. In 1982 county supervisors rejected, and

then agreed to, an April election. A coalition against incorporation filed a legal challenge, which was dismissed.

In order for incorporation to succeed, four related measures on the ballot had to be approved. One, a proposal to dissolve the East Palo Alto Sanitary District, lost by 41 votes. It was defeated by sanitary district voters who lived in Menlo Park and would not have been affected by incorporation. A new petition for incorporation was then filed in June 1983. This time a single measure was put on the ballot, and dissolution of the sanitary district was not a condition. Another lawsuit failed to stop the election.

Incorporation was approved by 15 votes: 1,782 to 1,767. East Palo Alto officially became a city on July 1, 1983.

Another legal challenge ensued, this one claiming that up to 300 absentee ballots, which tipped the balance of the election, were cast illegally. The county superior court invalidated only eight votes—five for and three against incorporation. The measure still won by 13 votes.

An appeal was filed, and in the fall of 1984 the courts tossed out some 100 absentee ballots. They were unanimously reinstated after another appeal brought the case before the state supreme court. The decision was appealed again, this time to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1987 it declined to review the case, ending all further legal challenges. To this day political forces on both sides of the issue remain deeply divided, and talk of disincorporation periodically resurfaces.

EAST PALO ALTO TODAY

As the high-tech industry in Silicon Valley enjoyed an economic boom in the 1980s and 1990s, East Palo Alto was one of the most affordable places to live as property values in nearby communities skyrocketed. The city's prime location near Highway 101 and the Dumbarton Bridge, combined with affordable housing rates, attracted a very diverse population to the growing community. Today, Hispanic, African American, and Pacific Islander residents represent the largest ethnic groups in East Palo Alto, making it one of the most multicultural and multilingual communities in the San Francisco Bay Area.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES WITHIN THE EAST PALO ALTO COMMUNITY, 1990 AND 2000²

Total Population and Ethnic Distribution

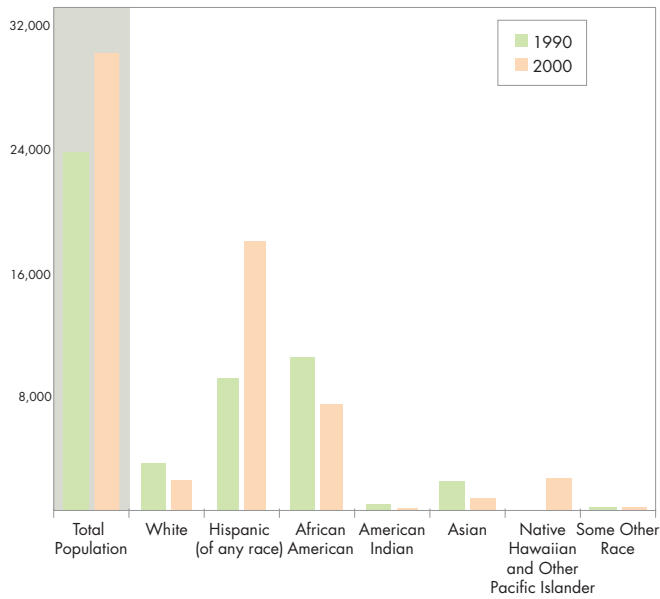
Between 1990 and 2000, the total population of East Palo Alto increased by 25.8%, nearly double the statewide figure of 13.8% and nearly three times the county figure of 8.9%. This

2. For more information about the East Palo Alto community, please see "Community Profile: East Palo Alto" by the Haas Center for Public Service. This document was produced in 2002 as part of the One East Palo Alto Neighborhood Improvement Initiative.

dramatic growth in population size resulted in major changes within the ethnic distribution in the East Palo Alto community.

Most of the population growth within East Palo Alto was due to a large increase in the Hispanic population, which increased from 8,527 in 1990 to 17,346 in 2002, an increase of 103.42%. As a result of this increase, the Hispanic population represented the single largest ethnic group in East Palo Alto in 2000, outnumbering the previous ethnic majority, the African American population, at a ratio of nearly 3:1. Though East Palo Alto continues to host the largest concentration of African Americans in the county, this population has continued to decline for the third decade in a row, generally following the same pattern as the rest of San Mateo County.

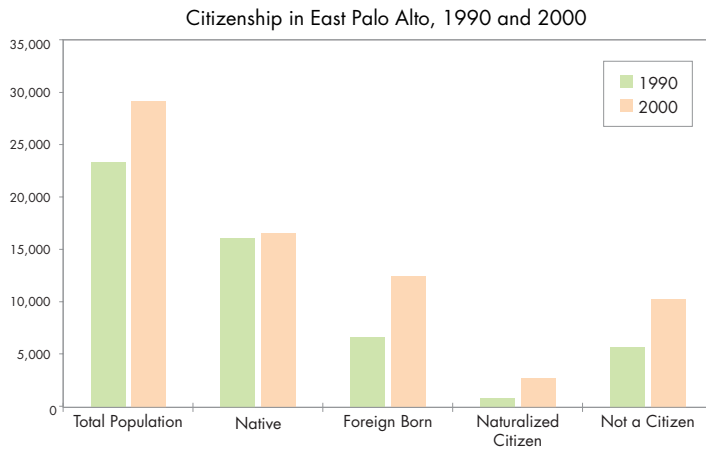
Population by Race and Hispanic Origin
in East Palo Alto, 1990 and 2000



Sources: U.S. Census 1990 Summary File (SF1) — 100% Count; U.S. Census 2000 Summary File — 100% Count.

Citizenship

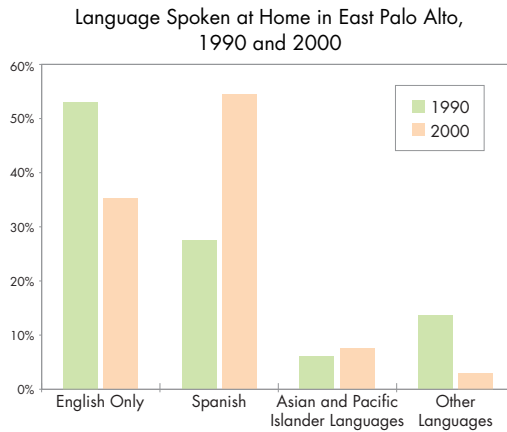
As a result of changes in ethnic distribution, there were other changes in citizenship and language use in East Palo Alto. Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population in East Palo Alto increased by 83.3%, from 7,038 to 12,904. In comparison, the native population increased by less than 1%, from 16,413 to 16,546, causing the ratio of native- to foreign-born citizens to drop from 2.3:1 to 1.3:1. Of the foreign-born population, 10,773 (83.5%) were from Latin America; 8,775 (81.4%) were noncitizens; 5,637 (52.3%) entered the United States between 1990 and 2000.



Sources: U.S. Census 1990 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data; U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Language

The impact of the large increase in the foreign-born population in East Palo Alto between 1990 and 2000 is reflected in changes in the percentage of individuals 5 years of age and over who spoke languages other than English at home. In 1990, 12,448 (53.1%) of those age 5 and over spoke only English at home; by 2000, 9,372 (35.2%) spoke only English at home, reflecting an overall drop of 32.8% in the number of people who spoke only English at home. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of people 5 years of age and over who spoke Spanish at home increased by 125.1%, from 6,438 to 14,492. In comparison, the number of individuals in San Mateo County who spoke Spanish at home increased by only 45.4%.

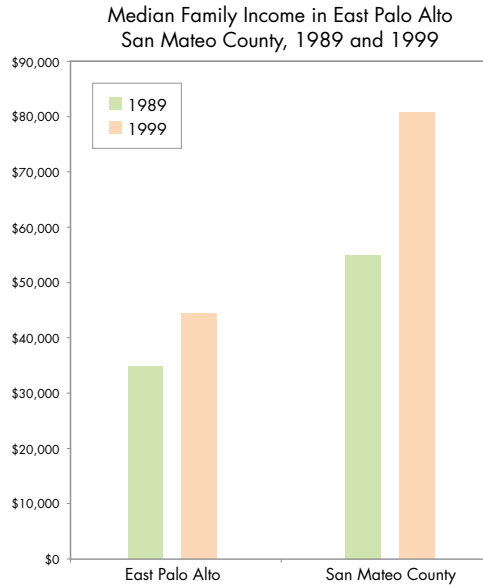


Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Income

Between 1989 and 1999, families in San Mateo County enjoyed a 46.9% increase in median family income, from \$54,963 in 1989 to \$80,737 in 1999. Though the median family income in East Palo Alto also increased, the percent change was only 27.5%, reflecting an increase in the median family income from \$34,776 in 1989 to \$44,342 in 1999.

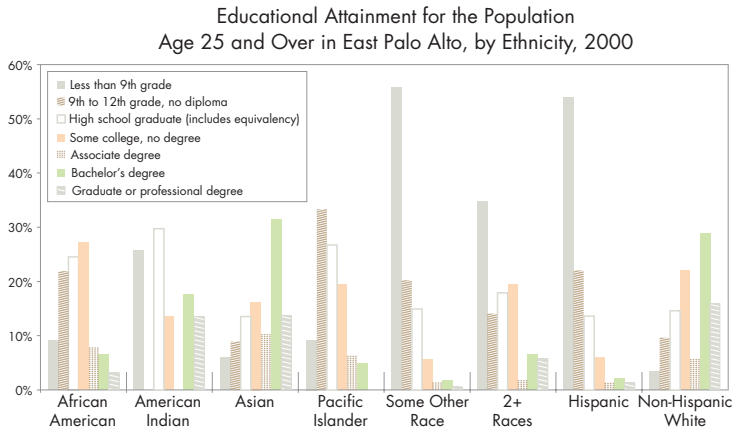
East Palo Alto continues to have the lowest median family income among all cities in San Mateo County, with income levels at least 30% lower than the city of Colma, located near the northern border of San Mateo County, which had the second-lowest income levels in the county.



Sources: U.S. Census 1990 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data; U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Educational Attainment

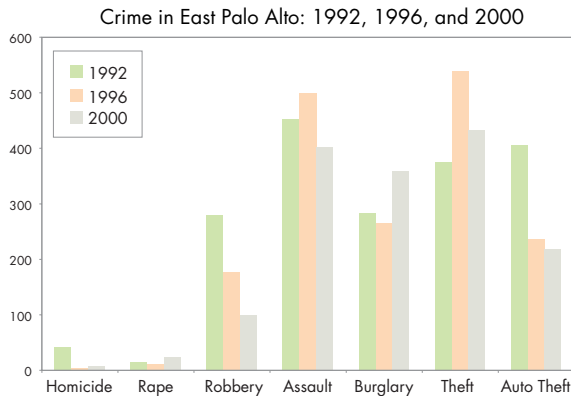
Between 1990 and 2000, the percentage of those 25 years of age and over with a high school diploma or higher level of education dropped by 6.8% in East Palo Alto, from 7,846 to 7,315. In comparison, the countywide percentage increased by 10.8%. The drop in the percentage of those with a high school diploma or higher level of education was further accentuated by the more than 10% increase in the number of those age 25 and over with less than a 9th grade education. An analysis of educational attainment data by ethnicity reveals some major differences among the different ethnic groups in East Palo Alto. In 2000, more than 50% of all Hispanics age 25 and over had completed less than a 9th grade education. In comparison, more than 50% of the African American and Pacific Islander populations had completed high school or higher level of education.



Crime Rate

In 1992, East Palo Alto's high crime rates drew national media attention because its per capita murder rate became the highest in the nation, causing it to be labeled the "murder capital of the nation." This stigma has stayed with East Palo Alto despite significant reductions in crime committed since then.

Since 1992, the total incidents of serious and violent crime decreased in both 1996 and 2000, from 1,854 in 1992 to 1,729 in 1996 and 1,539 in 2000. Total incidents of serious and violent crime also decreased countywide, from 29,496 in 1992 to 22,691 in 1996 and 18,600 in 2000. Overall, the total incidents of serious and violent crime for San Mateo County decreased during each four-year period at a greater rate (-36.9%) than for East Palo Alto (-16.9%). However, it is important to keep in mind that between 1990 and 2000 the total population in East Palo Alto increased by 25.5%, while the total population in the county increased by only 8.9%, suggesting that the per capita crime rate should have decreased at an even greater rate within East Palo Alto.

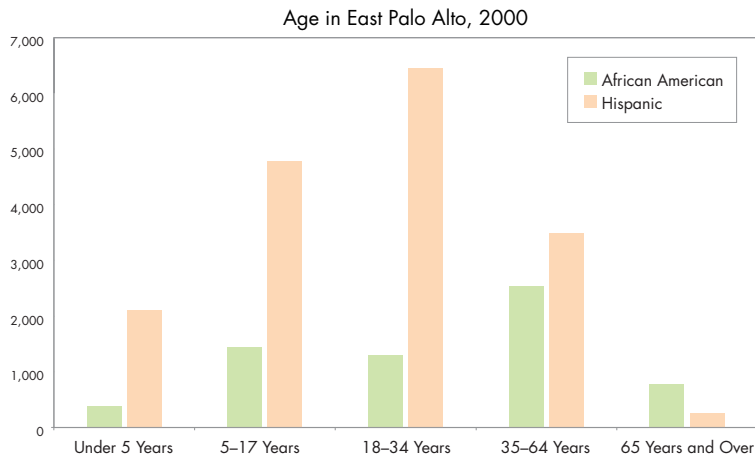


Source: East Palo Alto Police Department, 2001.

DEMOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW: AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC COMMUNITIES IN EAST PALO ALTO

Population and Age

- In 2000, there were 6,641 African Americans in East Palo Alto compared to 17,346 Hispanics.
- In 2000, the Hispanic population was very young, with approximately 77.7% of the population under the age of 35. In comparison, 49.8% of the African American population was under the age of 35.

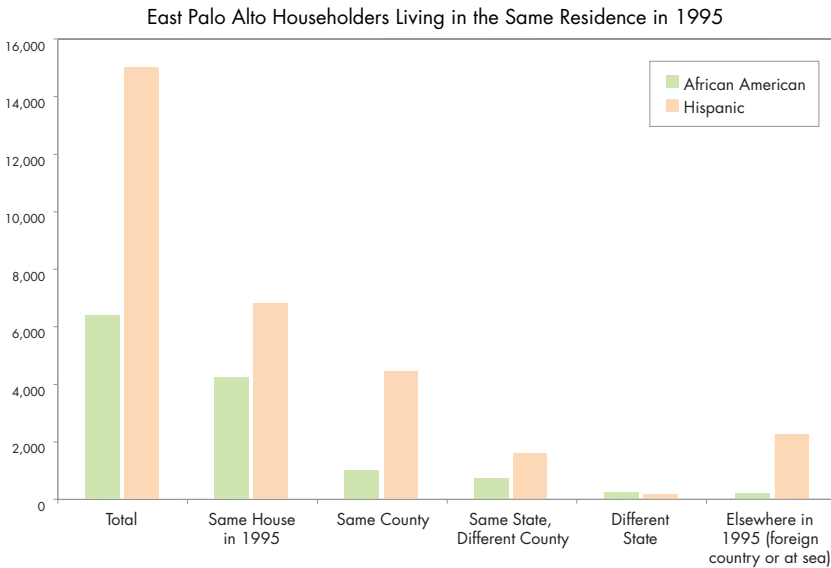


Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF1) — 100% Count.

Mobility

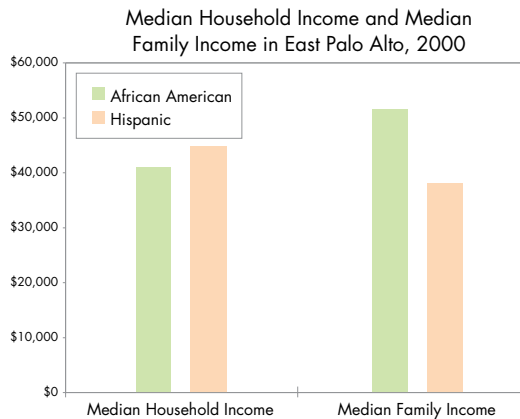
People living in the same residence for five or more years tend to have a more stable living environment and an increased knowledge of the community, and are more likely to have developed more relationships with people and organizations in the community. For more information about total population by ethnicity, see the chart labeled “Population by Race and Hispanic Origin in East Palo Alto, 1990 and 2000,” on page 5.

- In 2000, 4,388 (67.4%) of all African American householders in East Palo Alto lived in the same residence in 1995.
- In 2000, 6,927 (45.6%) of all Hispanic householders in East Palo Alto lived in the same residence in 1995.
- Since 1995, 16.9% of African American householders and 29.6% of Hispanic householders have moved to East Palo Alto from another part of San Mateo County. This migration from other parts of the county may have been due to the relatively low cost of housing in East Palo Alto compared to the rest of the county during that time.



Income

- For the Hispanic community, the median household income (\$45,023) was 10.3% greater than the median household income (\$40,806) for the African American community.
- The African American community had a median family income of \$51,220, 34.4% greater than the median family income for the Hispanic community.
- Median household income was greater than the median family income within the Hispanic community, which may have been due to the large number of young people (40.1% under the age of 18) within the community who had to be supported by their families.

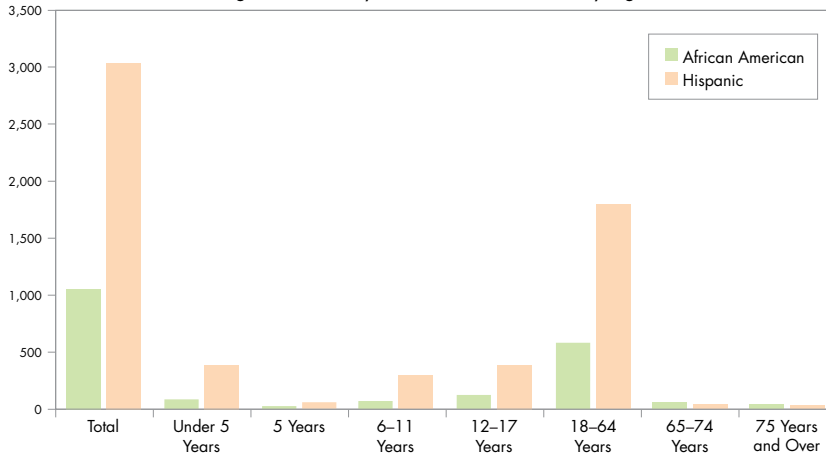


Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Individuals Below Poverty Level

- In 2000, 1,039 (15.6%) African American individuals lived below the poverty level. In comparison, 3,026 (17.4%) Hispanic individuals lived below the poverty level.
- Of the Hispanic individuals who lived below the poverty level in 2000, 39.9% were under the age of 18. In comparison, 28.3% of the African American individuals who lived below the poverty level in 2000 were under the age of 18.

Individuals Living Below Poverty Level in East Palo Alto, by Age, 2000



Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Family Characteristics

In 2000, African American families represented 1,631 (30.9%) of all families in East Palo Alto, compared to 2,720 (51.6%) of families that were Hispanic.

- In 2000, the average family size in East Palo Alto was 4.64. The average family size for the African American population was less than the citywide average, while the average family size for the Hispanic population was greater than the average.

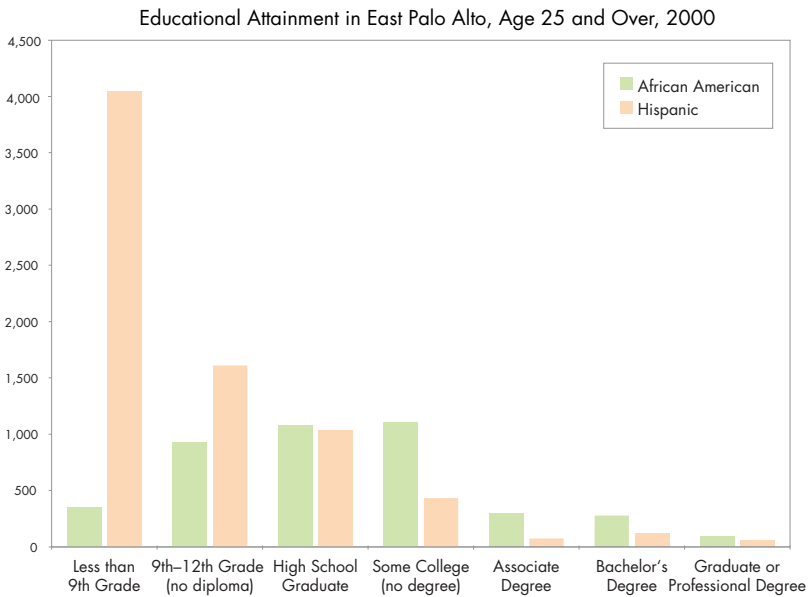
	African American	Hispanic
# of Families	1,631	2,720
Population in Families	5,688	14,824
Average Family Size	3.49	5.45

Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File 1 & 2 (SF1 & SF2) — 100% Count.

Educational Attainment

Formal education is a prerequisite for most employment and higher education opportunities.

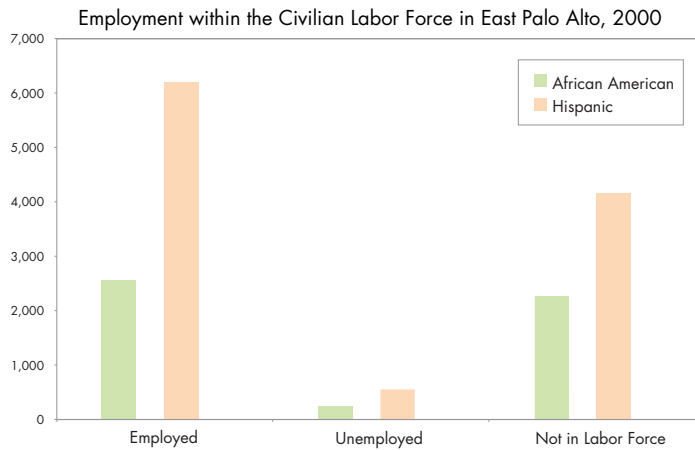
- In 2000, 4,035 (53.9%) of the Hispanic population 25 years of age and over had completed less than a 9th grade education. In comparison, only 389 (9.1%) of the African American population had completed less than a 9th grade education.
- Overall, the African American population had higher levels of educational attainment, with 749 (17.4%) of the population completing an associate, bachelor's, or graduate or professional degree. In comparison, only 4.6% of the Hispanic population completed these degrees.



Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Employment

- In 2000, 2,585 (50.2%) of the African American individuals in the civilian labor force were employed, compared to 6,199 (56.8%) Hispanic individuals who were employed.
- The African American community had a higher percentage of individuals (44.7%) who did not participate in the labor force compared to 38.2% within the Hispanic population. Because of the higher number of African American individuals 25 years of age and over who had college degrees or higher, the higher percentage of African American individuals not participating in the labor force may have been due to their continuing with their education.



Source: U.S. Census 2000 Summary File (SF3) — Sample Data.

Graduation Rate

- During the academic year 2000–2001, Sequoia Union High School District students who were Hispanic or African American had the lowest percentage of high school graduates or graduates who had completed their UC/CSU³-required coursework. The majority of these students were from East Palo Alto.
- Among students who actually enrolled in grade 12, there were fairly small differences between the African American and Hispanic populations. However, it is important to note that the low educational attainment levels within the adult Hispanic population (more than half of whom have less than a 9th grade education) suggest challenges within the Hispanic population in succeeding in school at earlier grade levels.
- Given the large percentage of the Hispanic population that was under the age of 18, education and graduation rates among the population may be increasingly important as an indicator of the ethnic group’s preparation for higher education and employment opportunities.

Gender	African American			Hispanic		
	Grade 12 Enrollment	# of Grads	Grads with UC/CSU Required Courses	Grade 12 Enrollment	# of Grads	Grads with UC/CSU Required Courses
Female	74	61 (82.4%)	11 (18.0%)	315	260 (82.5%)	49 (18.8%)
Male	55	39 (70.9%)	3 (7.7%)	311	211 (67.8%)	36 (17.1%)
Total	129	100 (77.5%)	14 (14.0%)	626	471 (75.2%)	85 (18.0%)

Source: Sequoia Union High School District/California Department of Education.

3. UC/CSU: University of California/California State University.

WILDFLOWERS INSTITUTE

1144 Pacific Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94133-4212
Phone: 415.775.1151
Fax: 415.776.3054
Website: www.wildflowers.org

For more information:
nectar@wildflowers.org