

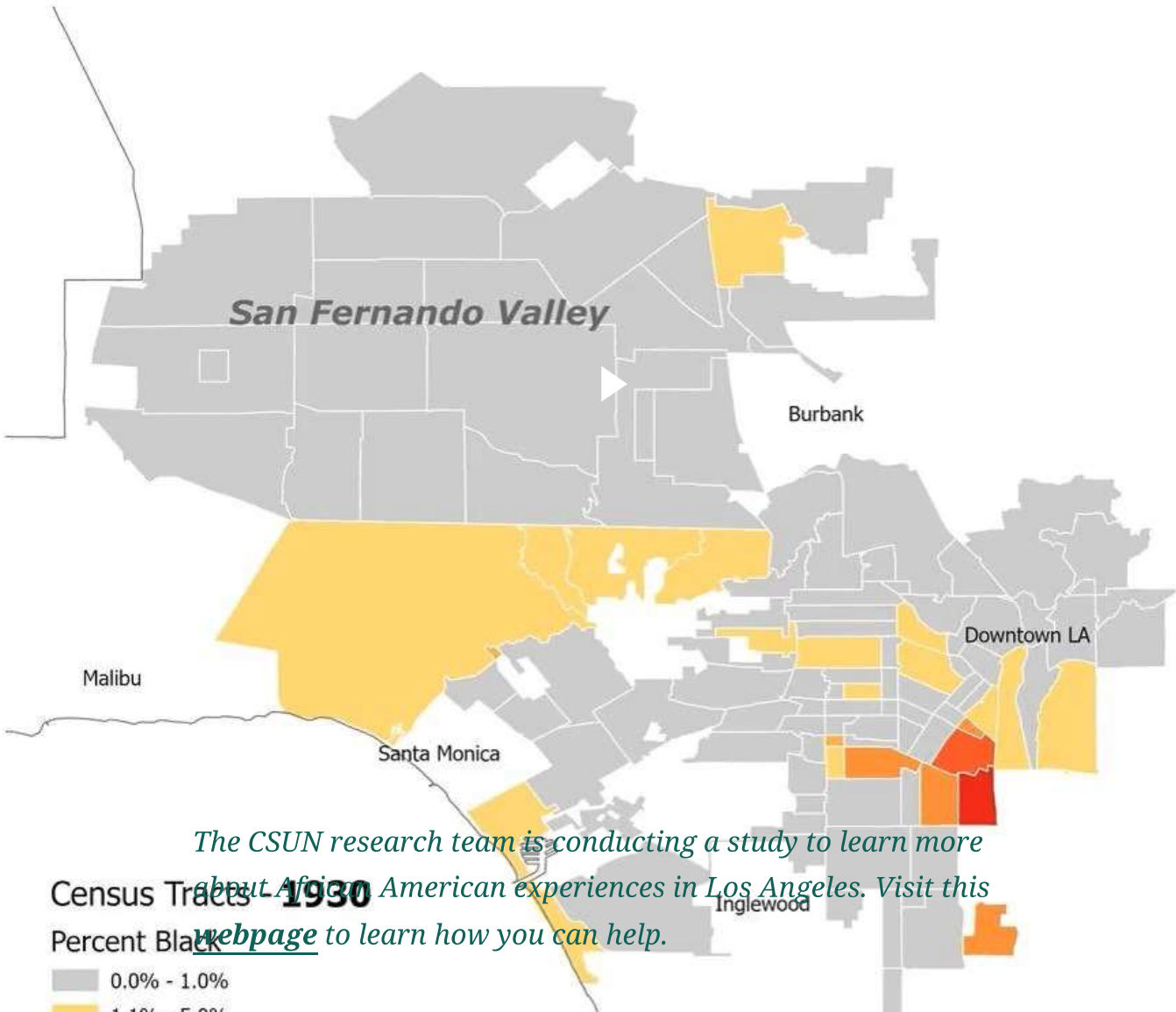


# Black Los Angeles: 1930-2020

Historical maps show how the distribution of Black communities in Los Angeles has changed over time

California State University, Northridge (CSUN)

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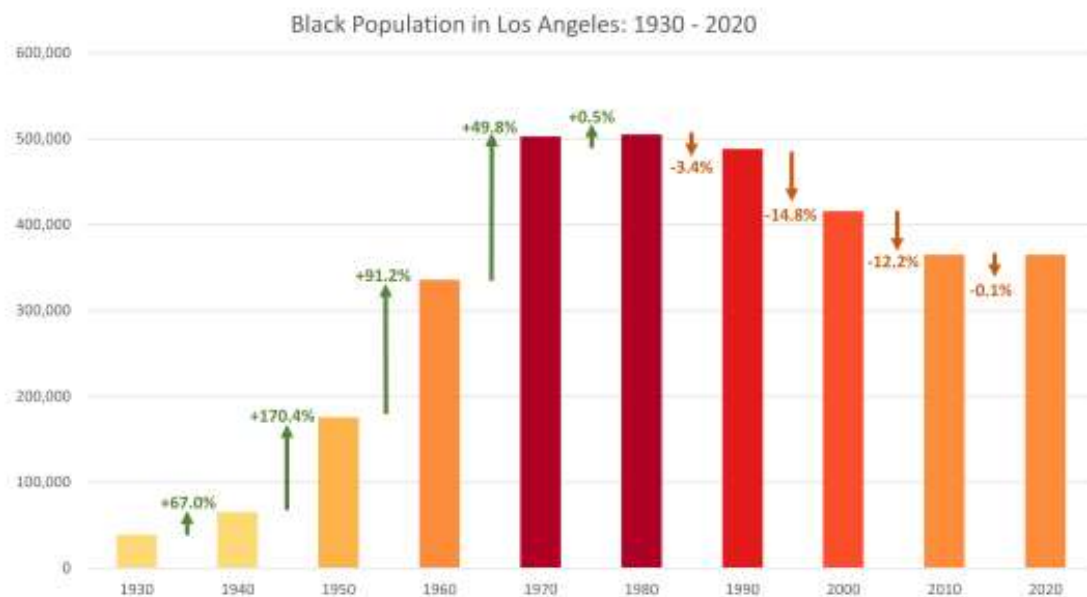
*The CSUN research team is conducting a study to learn more about African American experiences in Los Angeles. Visit this [webpage](#) to learn how you can help.*



*Spring Street, looking north toward "Baker Block," an office building complex that once dominated the Los Angeles skyline, 1885 (City of Los Angeles Archives)*

In the late 20th century, lured by the promise of opportunity, a wave of African Americans joined other racial and ethnic groups arriving in Los Angeles as the Southern Pacific Railroad completed a track that linked the city with the rest of the U.S.

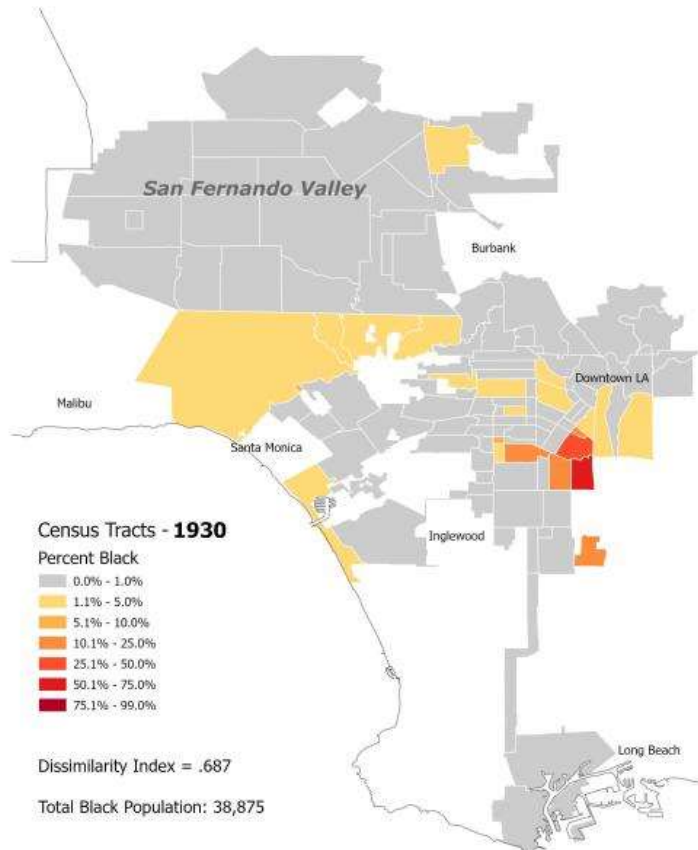
By 1920, the Black population--who hoped to benefit from the promises of Los Angeles--had increased exponentially, and these new migrants encountered a gap between their expectations and growing white hostility. Citywide policies contributed to the erosion of Black rights, and Black residents encountered violence and personal harm as the Ku Klux Klan and police brutality ravaged their neighborhoods.



Black neighborhoods were often neglected and even abandoned by local government, leaving Black constituents with poor infrastructure, inadequate transportation, inferior schools and parks, and limited access to economic and educational opportunities.

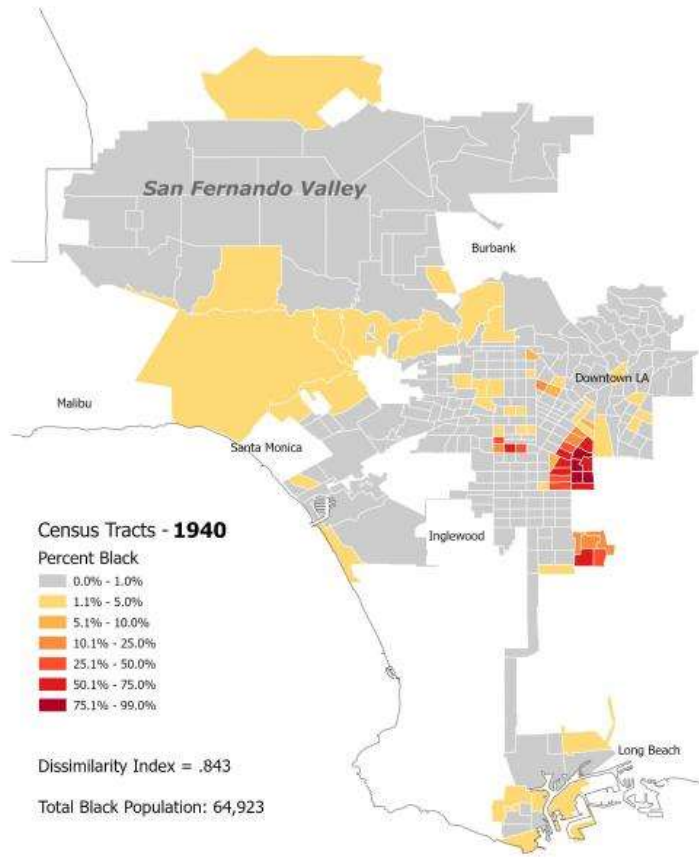
Despite the progress achieved during the Civil Rights Era and in the decades that followed, the legacy of systemic racism and discrimination continues to affect Black communities in Los Angeles to this day.

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LA's Black population grew rapidly during the Great Depression and expanded into what is now known as **Historic South Central**.

By the 1930s, the 40,000 Black people living in Los Angeles were largely confined to two neighborhoods. Those areas are known today as **Central Alameda/South Park** and **Watts**.

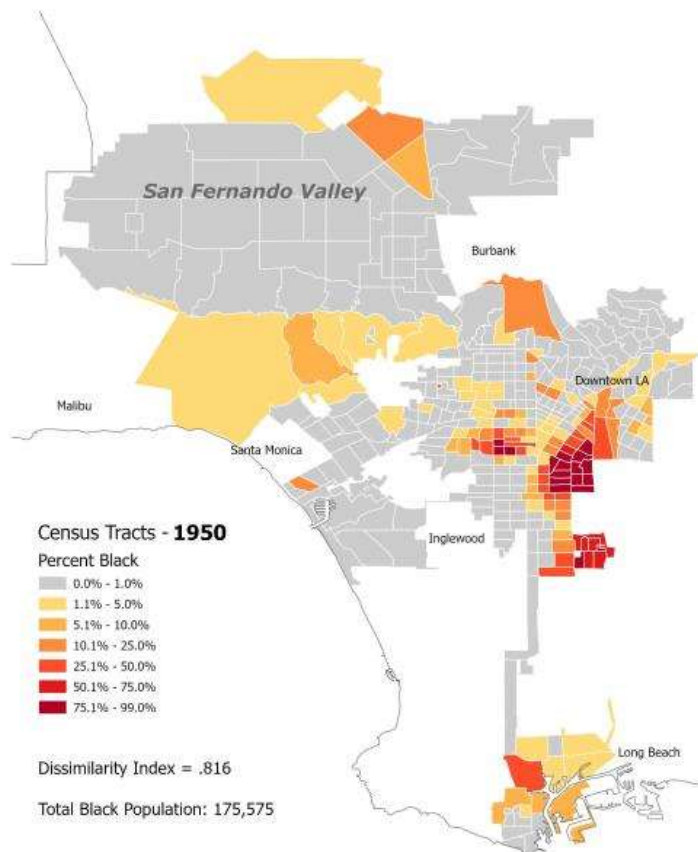


*Band performs at Jack's Basket Room, an after hours Jazz Club in South Central owned by the first black heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson, 1949 (Tom & Ethel Bradley Center Photograph Collection, CSUN)*

Although the Black population stood at nearly 65,000 (or 4.27 percent of the population) in 1940, restrictive covenants kept Black families from moving to new neighborhoods.

The dissimilarity index, a common measure of residential segregation, grew substantially just prior to World War II. The index can be interpreted as the percentage of Blacks that would have to move to achieve complete integration.

In other words, about 52,000 of LA's 65,000 Black people (84.3 percent), would have to move to make all the Census tracts equal to the citywide population of 4.27 percent Black.



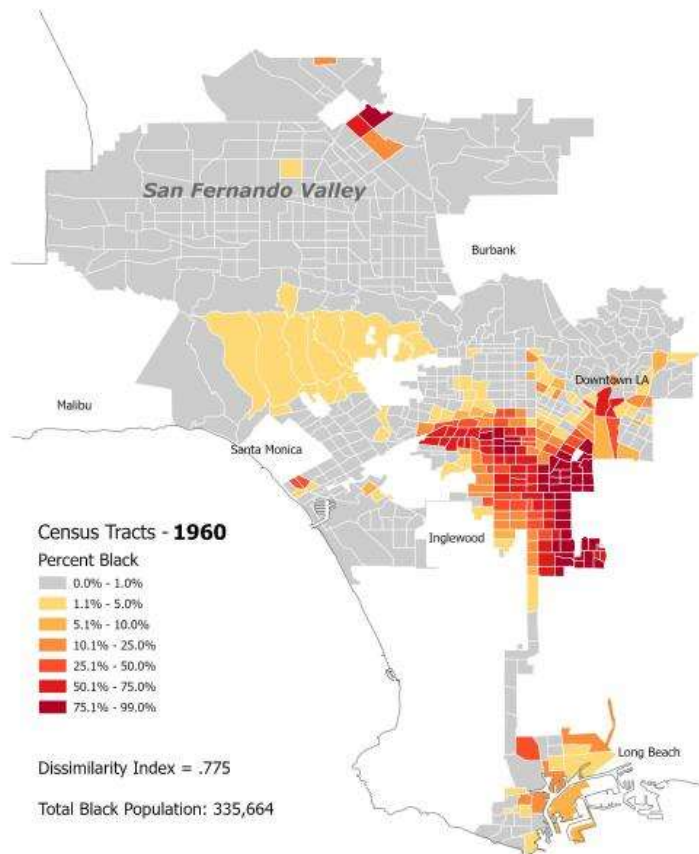
The pace of growth of LA's Black Community doubled during the War Years thanks to massive in-migration from the American South and Midwest fueled by robust job growth in war industries.



*Thomas Jefferson High School alumni reunion in South Central Los Angeles, 1950 (Dunbar Economic Development Corporation Collection, USC)*

By 1950, LA's Black population was approaching 200,000. The **South Central** to **Watts** corridor had by this time become predominantly Black.

Black neighborhoods also were growing in the northeast corner of the San Fernando Valley and the Harbor Area. The rapid expansion of the Black population into formerly white neighborhoods fueled a slight reduction in segregation.



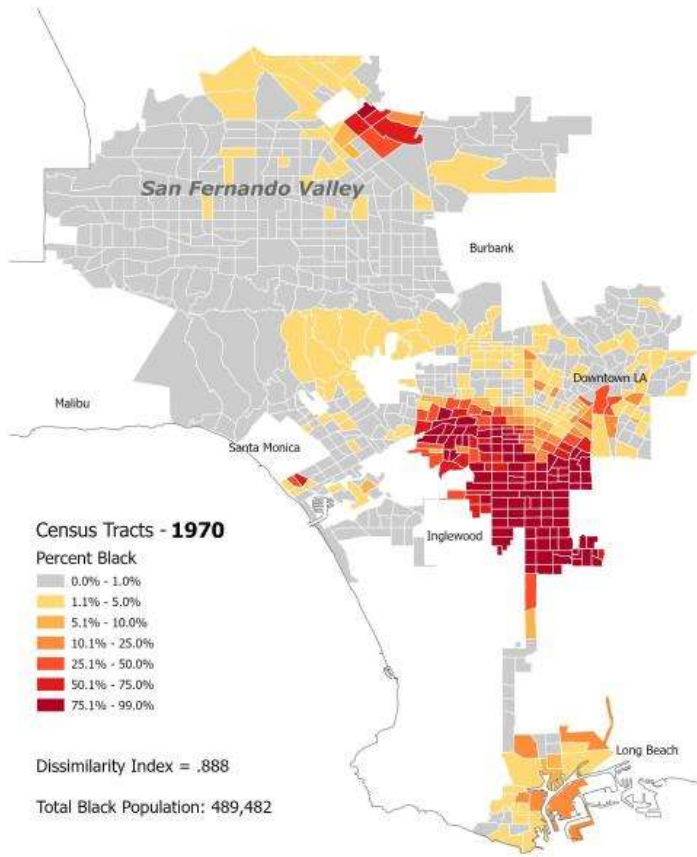
Those trends continued into the 1960s, as Cold War defense spending and robust job growth in other LA area industries continued to invite rapid in-migration. By 1960, LA's Black population stood at nearly 350,000, and segregation continued to drop as Black families expanded across most of **South Los Angeles** and into neighborhoods that had been mostly white.





*First day of integration at Baldwin Hills Elementary School, 1962 (Tom & Ethel Bradley Center Photograph Collection, CSUN)*

The expansion of the Black population into white neighborhoods in much of southwestern Los Angeles as barriers to further expansion were rapidly erected meant that any additional growth in Los Angeles' Black population would increase the level of segregation.



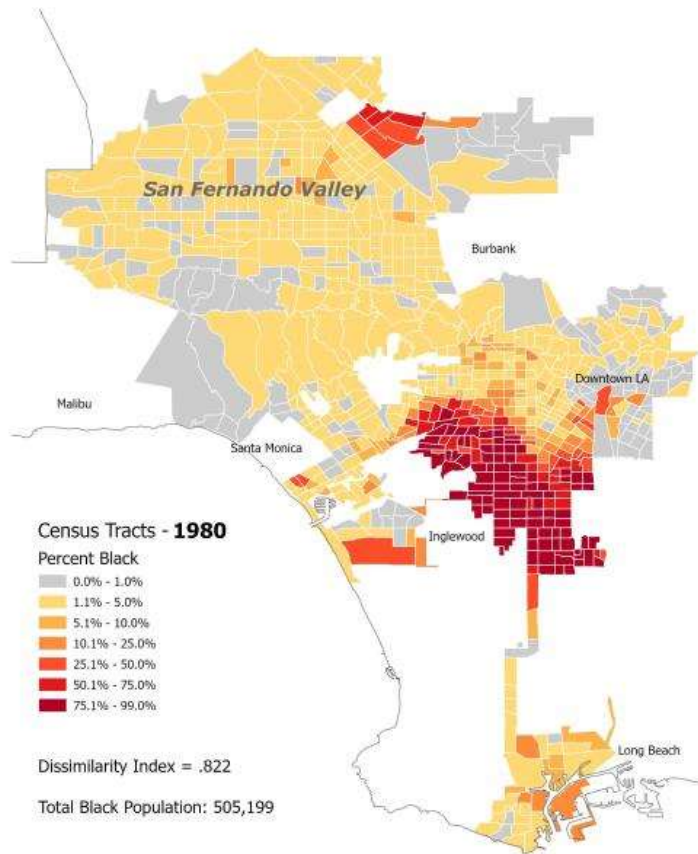


*Black Business Association members at a luncheon, 1973 (Tom & Ethel Bradley Center Photograph Collection, CSUN)*

By 1970, LA's Black population had reached almost half a million people. The ramping up of restrictions to Black residency peaked around 1968 when Civil Rights legislation finally started working to eliminate these barriers. As a result, this era was the low point for integration and the high point of Black "ghettoization" in Los Angeles.

The vast San Fernando Valley region was always the area of LA most vehemently opposed to integration. In 1970, while the Valley had a total population of nearly one million people, there were only about 18,000 Black people, who were mostly crammed into a few areas of **Pacoima** and **Arleta**. These areas were older sections of the Valley where restrictive covenants were not in place or not enforced.

While in 1970 LA overall was approaching 20 percent Black, the Valley was less than 2 percent Black. Outside of the small Black ghetto in **Arleta** and **Pacoima**, the Valley was less than half a percent Black.

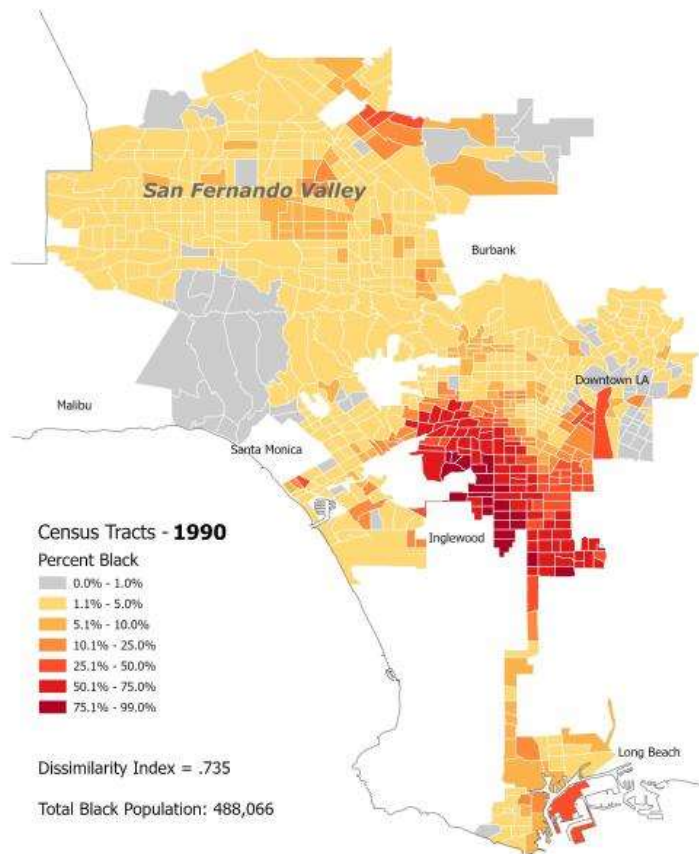




*Civil rights leader Dorothy Heights poses with staff and family in front of the LA Coliseum, 1989 (Tom & Ethel Bradley Center Photograph Collection, CSUN)*

Around 1980, LA's Black population reached its high point at just over 500,000. Thanks to Civil Rights legislation and litigation, Black Angelenos were finally allowed to move to all parts of the city where they could afford to buy or rent. Segregation decreased slightly, and very few neighborhoods remained without Black families.

At the same time, the historic core of Black LA--**South Central**--was beginning to give way to immigrant groups, mostly from Mexico and Central America.



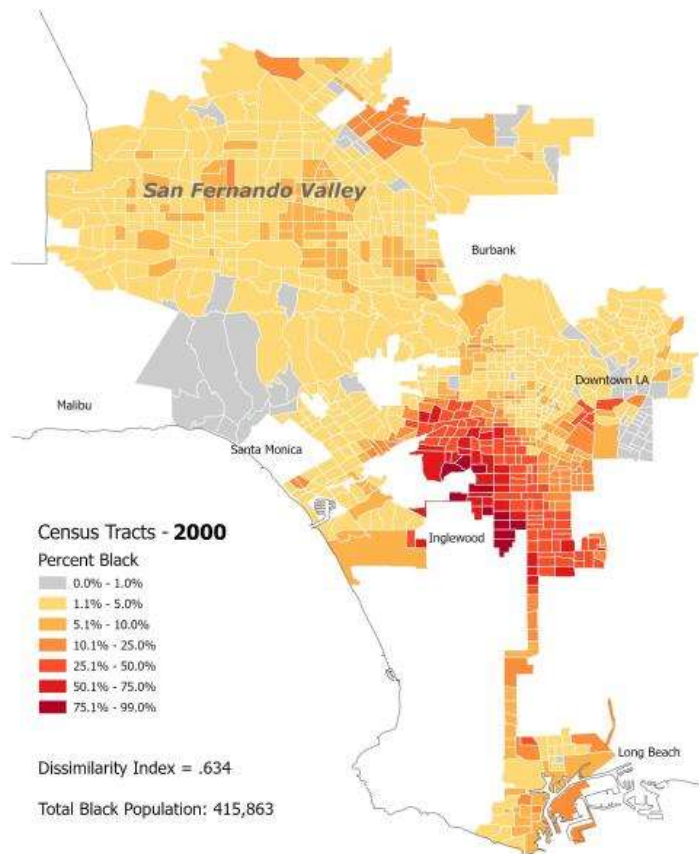
By 1990, only a few areas were without Black residents in Los Angeles, even as the overall number of Black people decreased by a few percent.

The evacuation of **South Central** continued apace as the **Crenshaw District** became the new heart of Black Los Angeles.



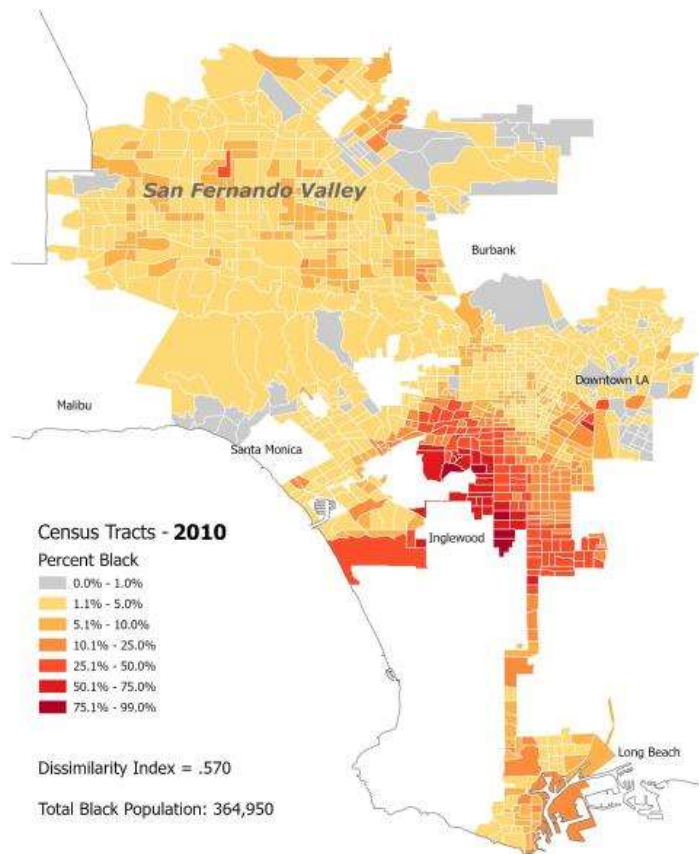
*California Assemblymember Frank Holoman poses with others at the Black Achievers office in Crenshaw, 1994 (Tom & Ethel Bradley Center Photograph Collection, CSUN)*

A similar outmigration of Blacks from **Arleta** and **Pacoima** to other parts of the historically very white San Fernando Valley occurred. Blacks constituted between 5 and 10 percent of some regions of the Valley; a modest figure to be sure, but a welcome trend for Black homeowners since property values in the Valley grew steadily.



During the last twenty years, the trends that began in the 1970s have largely continued. Blacks have become a minority in **South Central** and **Watts** as they continue to move west and south.

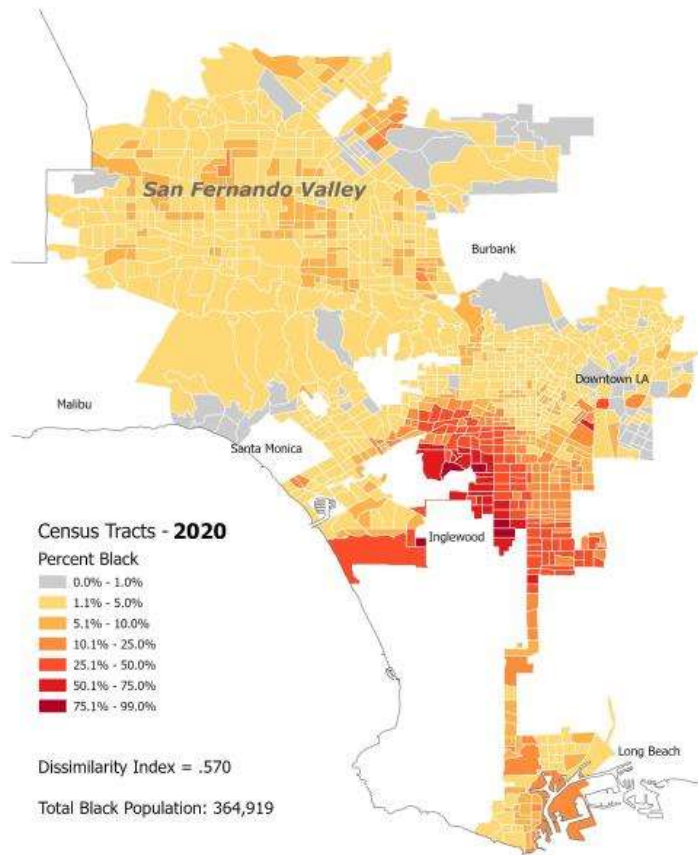




*Hip-hop dancers from Tommy's Dance Academy in Leimert Park, 2017  
(David Patrick Valera)*

Only the western reaches of the **Crenshaw District** (Baldwin Hills, View Park, etc.) remain solidly Black. **Inglewood** is

arguably the heart of Black “LA” now.



The 2020 Census estimates that about 360,000 Black people live in the City of Los Angeles, and all but a few neighborhoods have at least a few Black families.

The notable exceptions are the **Pacific Palisades**, parts of **East LA/Boyle Heights**, and the **Sunland/Tujunga** areas. Segregation has remained constant for the past 20 years and is decreasing slowly as Black families appear to be moving out of LA instead of across LA.

### **Acknowledgements**

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