More in US are moving down, not up

Haya El Nasser
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The Great Recession has upended the American tradition of moving to greener pastures. Instead of moving to a bigger home or for a higher-paying job, more Americans moved because they couldn't afford to stay where they are.

During the 2007-09 recession, 9 percent of Americans — about 4 million — moved locally, the highest level in a decade. And a growing number moved to cheaper housing or doubled up with family and friends, according to an analysis out Wednesday of census data through 2010.

By contrast, moves across county and state lines declined.

People moved the most in metropolitan areas with the highest unemployment and highest foreclosure rates, particularly in hard-hit parts of the Sun Belt, shows research by US 2010, a project funded by the Russell Sage Foundation and Brown University that examines changes in American society.

SHIFT IN REASONS

"This is the shock: For the first time, Americans are moving for downward economic mobility," said Michael Stoll, author of the research and chairman of UCLA's public policy department. "Either they lost their house or can't afford where they're renting currently or needed to save money."

At the peak of the recession, falling fortunes was a prime reason for moving. Before the economy tanked, 41.3 percent moved locally to own a home or settle in a better neighborhood. During the recession, only 30.4 percent moved for those reasons.

By contrast, more than 23 percent moved for cheaper housing during the recession, up from 20.8 percent before the bad times.

DISPROPORTIONATE EFFECT

The theme song of "The Jeffersons," a hit TV show in the 1970s about a black family that makes it big in the dry cleaning business and moves from Queens to Manhattan's East Side, is aptly titled "Movin' On Up."

Yet this economic downturn has taken a disproportionate toll on the upward mobility of African-Americans, the research shows.

"Blacks may have had less savings, fewer family members who could contribute, onerous debt from refinancing or subprime mortgages or greater expenses," Stoll said.

Unemployment and foreclosure rates are higher among blacks than whites.

"It's going to be years before (blacks) return to their pre-recession trajectory," said Roderick Harrison, a demographer at Howard University in Washington, D.C. "It's going to take a job, probably several months or years working at that job to maybe return to their own apartment or to get back into homeownership."