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Oakland County slowly expanding in diversity

By CHARLES CRUMM 8-13-05
Of The Oakland Press

Oakland County is following the same trend as the rest of the country and becoming more of a cultural melting pot — but at a slower pace.

The county's minority population grew to 20.7 percent, according to new data released by the U.S. Census.

The county ranks 35th in the country in cultural diversity among counties with a population of more than a million people. In contrast, Wayne County ranks 17th.

"The country, as a whole, is 33-percent minority," said Kurt Metzger, researcher for Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies, who regularly analyzes updated Census data.

"We may be a little late to the game, but we're starting to pick up the pace and starting to look like the country as a whole," Metzger said.

The updated Census information is current as of July 1, 2004, the latest year available.

Of the county's 1.2 million people, the Census lists the population as:

- Blacks at 146,308, up 16.4 percent since 2000
- Native Americans at 9,361, up 10.3 percent since 2000
- Asian at 67,875, up 24.6 percent since 2000
- Hispanic at 33,361, up 15 percent since 2000
- Pacific Islander at 1,148.

The county's white population declined by 16,254 people, or 1.7 percent.

Overall, the minority population is up from 18.2 percent in 2000.

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Metzger noted the Census doesn't count the Arab community, which has a large presence in southeast Michigan, a minority.

"You have this huge growth in the Asian community concentrated, for all intents and purposes in Oakland County," he said. "Oakland County is definitely seeing this continuous increase in the minority population — in most cases, a generally higher income, higher educated population."

Diversity has important positive economic impacts because of the number of foreign companies that do business here, Metzger said.

"What Oakland is able to do is attract some of the population that is critical for the economic future," Metzger said. "It's important to have ties to China, India, the Middle East, the countries that are going to be the economies of the future.

"It's important for businesses in Oakland to recognize the diversity and draw on the resident base to fill some of the employment," he said.

The Census estimates minority populations will exceed the white population nationally by the year 2050.

"I keep harping that it's important that Oakland and metro Detroit see the diversity and see it expanding because this is the country of the future," Metzger said.