Inside Bowie: Q&A with Rashawn Ray

**INSIDE BOWIE**

With two of the top-ranking wealthiest black ZIP codes in the city of Bowie, we decided to reach out to several residents there who could give us more perspective on what it’s like to live in the area, how it’s different from other places they’ve lived, what is going well and what is challenging the area. Each one brings a unique perspective, edited here for clarity, to what’s going on in Bowie.

Rashawn Ray, associate professor of sociology, University of Maryland, College Park

**Age:** 37

**Education:** Bachelor’s in sociology, minor in women’s studies, University of Memphis; master’s and Ph.D. in sociology, Indiana University; postdoctoral fellowship at University of California-Berkeley with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; spent time teaching at the University of Mannheim in Germany

**Family:** Wife, two children

**Bowie resident since:** 2012

Ray moved to Bowie from California with his family five years ago to begin his tenure at the University of Maryland. As a sociologist, his research has focused on racial and social inequality — and he has taken a serious look at his own neighborhood through that lens as well.

**How do you like living in Bowie?** I mean, I love living there. It’s similar in many regards to other middle-class neighborhoods in the area. It’s suburban, the houses are relatively new. They’re safe. The schools are good — a lot of people choose to send their children to private schools, similar to individuals who might live in Montgomery County. There are tons of amenities, tons of parks, restaurants, different public places that people can frequent. The Wegmans is, I think, one of the hits in the area, as far as being a place where a lot of people go, at the Woodmore shopping area that continues to expand.

**What makes it unique from a sociological perspective?** One of the differences is a certain level of comfort that I think African-Americans feel and experience. It’s not just about their perceptions, but actually how they experience social life, living in that area. That is significantly different from the
experiences that they might have in neighborhoods that look basically the same, but are predominately white. What this primarily has to do with is the way that black bodies are policed when they go in public space.

**How does the local history factor in?** The history of this area is something I think people really need to grasp and understand. So in the ’70s, this area that we’re talking about in Bowie and Upper Marlboro, it was originally set up for federal workers who were predominately white, to live outside of Washington, D.C. And after the Civil Rights Act in the mid-1960s, obviously we started seeing an increase in blacks getting equitable opportunities for upper mobility and education and in work. Unlike states around the country, the federal government was one of the first places to adopt equal employment policies. So African-Americans who were educated and who also were in the military flocked to this area and also started pursuing houses outside of Washington, D.C.

**What happened then?** These developers started noticing. They were like, ‘Wow, OK, this seems to be an area that black people like and would like to live in.’ And the story goes, they literally changed their marketing campaigns and started marketing more to blacks.

**So that sparked more integration?** There might have been a brief period of integration. But actually what’s happening is that the ZIP codes that you mention — 20720 and 20721 — are predominately black, I’m pretty sure over 90 percent. If you go on the other side of Bowie, what we call “old Bowie,” it’s predominately white in the other direction. And so, what we see is that as blacks moved out — and again, these weren’t poor black people, these were college-educated black people with good jobs — we still saw a level of “white flight” take place, where whites left the area. And that is why we have the hyper levels of segregation even among middle-class neighborhoods.

**What else has been a challenge there?** A lot of people, black people who live in that area in particular, have been disgruntled over the years, because they’re like, “Our area is safe, we have nice homes, we have nice jobs, but then we still can’t get certain businesses to come to our area and develop stuff.” So this is why the Wegmans is such a big deal. Also in that area, a Nordstrom Rack is being put up. That’s also a very big deal.

**How does the wealth in Bowie compare with the rest of the D.C. region?** As much wealth that is being accrued in these predominantly black neighborhoods that we’re talking about, they’re still a fraction of the wealth that’s being accrued in the predominantly white neighborhoods that look basically the same. And that has to do with race. It’s not about how much money people make, it’s not about the size of the house, it’s not crime, it’s not about these factors that people say drives down home prices of a neighborhood.

**What needs to happen to improve that inequality?** I think economic development is key. So I think the county continuing to push for economic development in these areas matter. First is the new Prince George’s County trauma hospital that is scheduled to be built close to the 20721 ZIP code. A huge upgrade to Prince George’s Hospital Center, which is extremely underfunded and dilapidated, extremely behind on technology. So, here you have the most affluent African-Americans in the United States who don’t have a good hospital within 20 minutes of them. What area are people this affluent and don’t have access to a great hospital?

**What else could redefine the area?** The second large economic development is the FBI headquarters that was scheduled to be put in Prince George’s County. And now it seems that the new FBI building might not even happen. We could talk about mom-and-pop places, we could talk about smaller places, but when you
start talking about a hospital and an FBI headquarters, I mean you are talking about completely transforming an area. And to commit to those things and then bail out of them is highly problematic.

**What other factors might contribute to inequality in this area?** I kind of chuckle, because I’m even part of this one. It happens in Howard and Montgomery County, but less so in those counties — the public schools aren’t being utilized in the way that they should. What I mean by that is, you have a large percentage of people who are highly educated, have professional jobs, make good money, who are opting to send their kids to private school. That’s essentially what we call a “brain drain.”

**How are the area’s private schools?** Some of the private schools in Prince George’s County are hands-down some of the best in the state, and if you’re one of the best in the State of Maryland, you’re one of the best in the country. So in the county, for example, Reid Temple Christian Academy is like the premier school in the county — phenomenal school. [The school’s] placement and their test scores are off the charts, in a very positive way, and it’s a predominately black school. Imagine if all those kids went to a public school. It’s not that our schools are bad in Prince George’s County, because actually they’re slightly above average compared to the rest of the country. What it is, is that they compare unfavorably to other counties in the area. And that’s because other counties in the area basically have the best schools in the country: Montgomery County, Howard County, the Alexandria area. So then black parents say, “I can pay to send my kids to private school,” and so that’s what they do.

**What else stands apart about Prince George’s County?** Prince George’s County, I think, is a lot more advanced in terms of their police-citizen relationships than other predominantly black areas. Now again, I also think this is classed, so if you’re asking people in the neighborhoods that you’re focusing on, I think you’d get a more positive answer than you do with people who live in other parts of the county and other parts of the area. But I think that Prince George’s County Police Department and the county executive’s office are, in many respects, light years ahead in terms of trying to improve relationships between citizens and the police.

**Why is that?** I think that has a lot to do with the black constituency that’s in the county, where they’re like, “We’re educated, we have good jobs, we’re good citizens — we should be treated just like everyone else.” And what that’s led to is a police department that is over 40 percent black. And you really can’t find too many police departments around the country that have that number of black officers. Now having black officers doesn’t mean that people are going to be treated better — that has to be very clear. But I do think that it matters for optics, in terms of how people are perceiving the police department.

**And what else do they do differently?** What it leads to is in the same way that white residents in a predominantly white area might live next door to a police officer, where their kid goes to school with a cop’s son, or they go to church with a police officer — now that’s happening in the black communities that we’re talking about. This is the way that police-citizen relationships change. And this is the reason why it’s a bigger difference here, than say in other parts of the country, even right down the road in Baltimore. It’s because people aren’t having those relationships with police officers.

*Carolyn M. Proctor*
Data Editor
*Washington Business Journal*
In compiling the 50 wealthiest ZIP codes in Greater Washington, we found the 10 wealthiest majority-black ZIP codes as well (outlined in bold here) — and there's some overlap.

From the Washington Business Journal:

The heart of black affluence in Prince George's County

Prince George's County remains the seat of African-American wealth, in the region and across the country. And it's still growing.

It's taken Karen Dale most of her life to find a place that feels so much like home. And now, she says, she's finally there.

Bowie, Maryland.

“Even though we’ve had a lot of development, there's that feel of being more on the rural side of suburbs. And we’ve got the winding, country roads, with big trees, and all of that,” said Dale, who heads up the Washington market for insurer AmeriHealth Caritas District of Columbia. “It’s a beautiful place to live.”

She need just walk out of her front door to find other business leaders who feel the same way, for a variety of reasons, many of whom might look like her. If you’re a wealthy African-American professional in Greater Washington, chances are, you live in Prince George's County, known to house some of the richest majority-black neighborhoods across the country. That’s where we found nine of the Washington region's 10 wealthiest majority-black populations today, using detailed ZIP code data from geographic information company Esri.

And according to the Census, those communities are bringing home bigger paychecks over the years. But even so, studies have shown how the communities have failed to bounce back from the Great Recession's damage as fast as other communities have, causing the wealth gap between black and white neighborhoods to widen.

In the last 30 years, the wealth of American white families has grown by 84 percent, three times the rate of American black families, according to a study last year by D.C. nonprofits The Institute for Policy Studies and Prosperity Now, formerly CFED. If that trend were to continue for the next 30 years, the report said, then the average wealth for white families would rise annually by $18,000, but by only $750 for black families, in that time. The study found that homeownership was the top factor in this disparity, with only 41 percent of black households owning their homes, compared with 71 percent of white households. Not only were black families less likely to receive inheritances and down-payment assistance to help buy a home in the first place, but they were also much slower to gain home equity as a result.

Further, home values have been slow to rebound. Between 2009 and 2015, home values dropped an average of 13 percent in the Prince George's County cities with the wealthiest majority-black ZIP codes, according to our analysis of American Community Survey Census data. In comparison, home values grew by about 1 percent in the suburban cities that topped our overall Wealthiest ZIP Codes List this year, rising to nearly 7 percent in McLean. During that time period, the Census data also show a slight uptick in rentals in the Prince George's cities. Though, keep in mind the caveats: Some of these Prince George's cities contain more than one ZIP code, not to mention a wider range of home values compared with areas like Great Falls, where nearly all homes near the $1 million range.

And here's the good news: Those home sales prices have been on the rise in those Prince George's cities, as are the number of home sales. And the average days a home spends on the market have been shrinking in the county, another sign of positive growth. Jim Estepp, president and CEO of the Prince George's County Business Roundtable says the area
has really rebounded in the past two years, pointing to the county’s 4.3 percent unemployment level today compared to 7.7 percent in 2011. He said the region “has been in recession up until a couple years ago,” regarding home pricing and sales. “I’ve observed the county my entire adult life, and it’s been a long since I’ve felt this good about our future,” he said. Estepp also cited the county’s residential assessment increase of 14.2 percent at the end of 2016, the highest increase in the state.

“There were three houses for sale in our phase of our development. Two are already off the market, and this has only been in the last couple of months,” said Jesse Holland, race and ethnicity writer for Associated Press and a Bowie resident. “We’ve been noticing that even the ones that when they do go on the market, they don’t stay that long anymore. So we can see the turnaround happening.”

But for many black residents, the reasons for settling in a Bowie or Brandywine aren’t entirely financial. There are also social benefits — the amenities of an affluent neighborhood, but without the unspoken need to justify where you live.

“What you have is a certain level of comfort, a certain level of tolerance, a certain level of awareness that a person walking down the street of any race potentially should have the right to be there, and probably does have the right to be there. So there’s no need to be alarmed, as far as calling the police, or asking them who they are or why they’re there,” said Rashawn Ray, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Maryland and another Bowie resident. “In Prince George's County, in particular, in the northern-eastern portion that we’re talking about, I think that level of black affluence that’s there is unmatched around the country. So I think a lot of people flock there to gain those experiences that they don’t get in other types of neighborhoods.”

Ray found that middle-class black men experienced disparities in how much they exercise in public depending on the demographics of their communities. They had 85.4 percent lower odds of exercising in neighborhoods they perceived as predominantly white than in predominantly black or racially diverse neighborhoods, according to Ray’s research, published in March in Social Science Research. That was less the case for black women: “Although facing their own stereotypes, black women are not criminalized as being violent predators to the same degree as black men,” Ray wrote in the study.

As for Dale and her husband, Russell Manns, they say they’re in Bowie to stay. They have done considerable work improving their own property over the years, laying new hardwood floors, building a deck, installing a pool and planting a garden. “I would say, I wouldn’t pick someplace else,” Dale said. “Other people would say, ‘Oh, well, Montgomery County is really fabulous.’ And I’m like, ‘Don’t sleep on Prince George’s County,’ specifically Bowie or Upper Marlboro.”
ON THE MAP

PROSPERING IN PRINCE GEORGE’S

We found 10 ZIP codes in the region where more than half of residents are black among the 100 wealthiest ZIP codes in the metro area, nine of them being in Prince George’s. The 10th was in D.C., on the edge of Silver Spring.

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<td>Population</td>
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<td>Black population</td>
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By the numbers: Prince George’s County

494,517 county labor force in 2016
908,049 total county population
21,637 unemployment in 2016
4.4% unemployment rate in 2016
$1,062 average weekly wage in 2016
16,014 number of businesses in 2016
423 number of businesses with 100 or more workers

Homes

$255,000 median sale price of a home
10,384 number of homes sold in 2016
2,750 number of homes sold in 10 days or less in 2016, 26.5 percent of total homes sold that year

Median household income, 2015

Prince George’s: $76,366
Maryland: $75,847
U.S.: $56,516

Racial and ethnic demographics: Prince George’s

65.4% African American
26.6% White
15% Hispanic or Latino
4.3% Asian
2.5% Two or more races
1% Native American
0.2% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Sources: Maryland Department of Commerce, Prince George’s County Economic Development Corp., Bright MLS Inc.

Additional content:
Inside Bowie — Three Q&As with Bowie residents Rashawn Ray, Karen Dale and Jesse Holland

The wealthiest ZIP codes

Below is an interactive map of the region’s ZIP codes created by Esri, color-coded to show wealth, with the darkest areas being the wealthiest. Click each ZIP code to find out more details. (Zoom-in buttons are on the left side of the map.)

Then, underneath is more data on the wealthiest majority-black neighborhoods compared to the wealthiest overall in the region, using data from the Census American Community Survey and Bright MLS Inc. (Zoom-in buttons for these charts...
are at the bottom.)
**HARD WON REVIVAL**

Census data tell the story of how these majority-black areas struggled to rebound from the Great Recession for longer than other wealthy areas in the region, but newer data shows a substantial turnaround in recent real estate sales.

**HOME VALUES**

**2009** | **2015**
--- | ---
Aerage sold price | $99,883 | $105,959
Accokeek, Md. | $115,510 | $123,559
Brandywine, Md. | $83,667 | $118,370
Glenn Dale, Md. | $95,718 | $114,866
Fort Washington, Md. | $102,907 | $104,132

**GROWING PAYCHECKS**

Though the very richest suburban cities in Greater Washington have seen more even income growth, earnings have been steadily rising in the wealthiest majority-black cities of the region between 2009 and 2015.

**MEDIAN INCOMES SINCE GREAT RECESSION**

**Wealthiest black cities**

Accokeek, Md. | 2009: $115,510 | 2015: $123,559
Glenn Dale, Md. | 2009: $95,718 | 2015: $114,866

**Wealthiest cities overall**

Great Falls, Va. | 2009: $197,446 | 2015: $234,091
Bethesda, Md. | 2009: $109,094 | 2015: $114,713

**SOURCE:** Census American Community Survey