

This Kansas county has no ethnic majority, but is it one of the most diverse in U.S.?

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Author: Rick Montgomery, The Kansas City Star | Section: local

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Kansas City has a history of second-best claims.

Boosters long ago hailed it second only to Chicago in meatpacking. Then second to Paris in boulevards. And second-most fountains behind Rome.

None simple to prove. Now....

“Kansas City’s Wyandotte County is the second-most diverse community in the nation,” pitches the Visit KC press kit. Visit KC is contracted by Kansas City, on the Missouri side, to promote area travel and convention options.

In the last three years the “second most diverse” claim has been repeated by leaders of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County, by Kansas City, Kan., education officials and, yes, by news media.

And while the story of the county’s complex racial and national-origin profile is worth telling — especially to outsiders who believe nothing about Kansas is diverse — it’s also worth asking: Who says and by what measure? And what does it really mean?

Who’s number one?

Turns out a local health official named Wesley McKain helped get the “second-most diverse” refrain started.

He admits: “I’m a geeky person” intrigued by metrics. As a program supervisor in the Unified Government Public Health Department, he spent a day in 2014 crunching data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

McKain was curious to see how Wyandotte County compared in ethnic makeup to other metropolitan areas. A mirror image might provide clues to how the county could better address health needs of traditionally underserved groups.

His first discovery: The county was among just a few dozen in America without an ethnic majority. That is, Wyandotte County already is where demographers say the nation as a whole will be in a couple of generations.

Non-Hispanic whites comprised about 42 percent of the county's population in the years McKain analyzed, 2008 to 2012. Hispanics represented 26 percent and blacks made up 25 percent. A mix of other ethnicities, including refugees, rounded out the population.

Next, "I wanted to find a county that looks a lot like Wyandotte," recalled McKain.

That hunt was joined by a data sorter in Mayor Mark Holland's office, who wrote to McKain in March 2015: "The cool stat ... is that there are only 2 counties in the country where both the (African-American) and Hispanic populations are greater than 25 percent — Wyandotte County and Broward County, Fla."

Broward County? As in the Fort Lauderdale metro, seaside home to nearly 2 million people?

From that, Wyandotte County and its population of 160,000 became tagged as the nation's second-most diverse.

As for Broward County, its lead role was news to Barbara DeMott of the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau.

"Honestly, this is the first I've heard it," she told The Star last week.

Among several online sites that attempt to rank America's "most diverse counties," no two agree. Niche.com lists Broward County at No. 14 and puts Wyandotte County in 24th place. (Alameda County in California tops its calculations.)

City-Data.com presents altogether different listings, including one ranking Wyandotte County sixth-most diverse among "counties that have 3 groups over 20% of the population."

Even McKain questions what these rankings mean.

Wyandotte and Broward counties have so little in common. Broward is richer, older, more Republican and far more Cuban than Wyandotte.

Eventually the story of the findings spread "like the telephone game," McKain said, and Wyandotte County being No. 2 on the U.S. diversity charts became "sort of our tagline."

Does diversity mean integrated?

The county's efforts to promote its melting pot raises a delicate question.

"So it's diverse. But is that a good thing?" said Bill Bishop, author of "The Big Sort."

His book analyzes Americans' growing appetite for living in counties and voting blocs of like-minded people, which Bishop argues has deepened the nation's political divisions.

“Diversity is assumed to be good and unassailable,” said Bishop. “But the central cities that have gotten most diverse overall are more segregated.”

A 2007 study based on interviews of 30,000 people across America found that the greater an area’s diversity, the less people vote, the less they work on community projects and the more they voice distrust of neighbors. That study was headed by Harvard political scientist and “civic engagement” guru Robert Putnam, most known for his 2000 book “Bowling Alone.”

And at least in Wyandotte County, a diverse population has done little to build a multi-racial power structure, noted Kansas Sen. David Haley, an African-American who this year lost a bid to become mayor.

“In the history of Kansas City, Kan., there has never been a mayor of color — and that includes anyone of Latin descent,” he said.

“I am so proud to live in a place that is so diverse,” added Haley, whose senate district is slightly more than half white. “But there’s very little diversity reflected in the elected representation.”

Adding to the county’s challenges is the need for KCK public schools to manage communication in a district where 74 languages are spoken.

High school students are tapped to serve as translators for parent-teacher conferences in the lower grades. The district also contracts with as many professional interpreters as needed to keep families informed, said superintendent Cynthia Lane.

“It’s taken a whole community to make this work,” she said, but educating within a tapestry of global cultures “is a treasure to us.”

Not Kansas white

Whatever its place in national rankings, Wyandotte County always has been defined by its rich ethnic blend.

From ex-slaves who settled Quindaro in the north, to Latinos who filled Argentine, to eastern Europeans who lived on the bluffs west of the packinghouses a century ago, “we’ve historically been a very good area for bringing in different groups,” said Patricia Schurkamp of the Wyandotte County History Museum.

The museum in recent years has tried to elevate that aspect of the county’s heritage, “and believe it or not, it does bring people.”

Schurkamp said a Quindaro exhibit earlier this year drew 300 visitors, which she called a success for the modest museum in Bonner Springs.

Last month, tourism officials from across Kansas spent much of their annual conference discussing ways to stress

diversity. Some noted that the site of the conference, Garden City, boasts a vast Latino community that might surprise other parts of the nation.

Bridget Jobe of the Wyandotte County Convention and Visitors Bureau said “there’s a huge misconception about the entire state of Kansas.... We are trying hard to overcome that.”

Kansas’ neighbor to the east recently learned how perceptions on racial inclusivity can harm a state’s image. Missouri drew national attention for being the first U.S. state subjected to an NAACP travel advisory urging people of color to use caution when visiting.

In Wyandotte County, all its flavors sparkles along two blocks of Minnesota Avenue just west of downtown KCK.

A longtime shopkeeper of Asian descent sells mostly to Hispanic customers, who buy pinatas that hang from the ceiling. Next door, the family of Eh Buh, a refugee of Burma, runs the Klo Htoo Market. It has provided Buh a decent Wyandotte County lifestyle for eight years, culminating in his obtaining U.S. citizenship.

Ask Monique Snead, an African-American who has lived in the neighborhood four years. She’ll say the more variety, the better.

“My goal,” said Snead, 24, “is to learn a word a day from a different language.”

Rick Montgomery: 816-234-4410, @rmontgomery_r

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