

Visitors tour much-changed South L.A.

Officials from Latino groups study the effects of once-black areas becoming mostly Spanish-speaking ones.

By Peter Y. Hong, Times Staff Writer
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Two dozen visitors to Los Angeles boarded a bus Sunday and headed to places many choose to avoid.

They ventured to distressed sections of South Los Angeles that had been shaken by recent violence between African Americans and Latinos. But they were looking for signs of hope — and strategies to address problems that could emerge in their communities.

The urban tourists were officials from Latino-oriented community groups in various states and the foundations that fund them. As part of a Los Angeles conference on Latino philanthropy, they were given a tour of South Los Angeles neighborhoods and landmarks, with analysis by community experts.

"Los Angeles is the bellwether, it is one of the first places to experience positive and negative lessons," said Manuel Pastor, a UC Santa Cruz professor who was a tour leader. "Across the U.S., the two populations in close proximity are African Americans and Latinos."

From the posh Wilshire Grand Hotel in downtown Los Angeles, the bus bumped along potholed streets that led to the ill-defined sector called South-Central.

"It's not really south, and not that central," said Marqueece Harris-Dawson, executive director of Community Coalition, a South Los Angeles nonprofit group. Harris-Dawson said the moniker actually had identified the city's African American community, not a geographic location. Now, the designation applies to an area that has become overwhelmingly Latino.

It was a recurrent theme on the bus tour, both in data handed out by Pastor, an economist whose research incorporates demographic analysis, and in the views through the bus windows.

Near the various landmarks, such as the Dunbar Hotel, which beginning in 1928 served prominent African Americans who were not permitted in the city's white hotels, and the childhood home of diplomat and Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche, were restaurants, grocery stores and other shops that catered to Spanish-speaking customers.

The diminished African American presence coincided with the disappearance of well-paying industrial jobs, the tour guides said. The bus passed the site of the once-sprawling Goodyear tire plant, now a post office. The streets remain lined with industrial shops, but they are small operations that make plastic bags or cheap clothing. Makeshift stands now offer \$5 jeans and \$1 shirts.

Pastor described South Los Angeles as having gone through "deindustrialization" with the loss of manufacturing plants, followed by "re-industrialization" with low-paying, small-scale industries that now are the zone's main employers.

The tour included schools such as Jefferson High, which had been torn by fights between Latino and African American students in 2005. Harris-Dawson said that when the fights occurred, Jefferson had 4,000 students on a campus designed for fewer than 1,000.

As the bus moved through blocks of run-down houses, some with trash and broken-down cars on the lawns, Harris-Dawson reminded everyone that "it's important to remember you're in the U.S.A."

When teenagers attend crowded schools and live in conditions "slightly above the Second or Third World," Harris-Dawson said, "they are going to rebel against those conditions one way or another."

Rather than fixate on outbreaks of racial violence between groups, the tour guides said, attention and resources must be directed to creating better work and school opportunities and living conditions, which are the most serious strains on the community.

The passengers listened quietly as the bus made its way through the city.

They disembarked only once, for a 10-minute viewing of the Watts Towers, and ended their journey with a discussion at the Community Coalition's Vermont Avenue offices.

One of those on the tour, Rodrigo Vargas, a board member of a Brevard, N.C., social service agency that helps Mexican immigrants, said black-Latino tensions were not a problem in his community. The area's strong economy, which attracted immigrants, also means that strife is minimal, he said.

But Vargas said "It could happen in the future." "As the population of immigrants is going up, there might be less jobs," he said. "We have to work together before there is tension."