

# OVERLAY DEMOGRAPHICS: "ABOUT A THIRD WHITER"

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COMPANION TO "VENEERS OF HISTORY IN GREEN HILLS EAST", *NASHVILLE SCENE*

## FINDING

Nashville's conservation overlays are about 75 percent white, against 56 percent countywide — roughly a third whiter — and the gap is concentrated in the oldest west-side districts. The figure reflects who lives in the overlays now, not why the lines were drawn.

## SUPPORTS IN THE ARTICLE

- *MHZA conservation overlays are about a third whiter than the county*
- *roughly 75 percent white against a countywide 56 percent*

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## ABSTRACT

Nashville's conservation overlays — the historic districts the zoning commission protects — are about 75 percent white, against 56 percent for the county, or about a third whiter.

The number comes from the 2020 Census. Every census block reports its residents by race; this analysis lays the overlay boundaries over those blocks and counts the people inside, splitting any block the boundary crosses in proportion to how much of it falls within the overlay. It describes who lives in the overlays now — not why the districts were drawn, who lived there when they were created, or whether the overlays pushed anyone out.

An overlay begins with a neighborhood that wants one, and the neighborhoods that organize for historic protection are white. The whitest districts — Belle Meade Links Triangle, Kenner Avenue, Cherokee Park, all above 90 percent white — are the oldest, the first the city drew. The only Black-neighborhood overlays are recent, and they came from a federal grant to document Black neighborhoods, not from a neighborhood campaign. The overlays adopted since 2014 average less white than the old ones, but that is the grant, not a change of course. The map of overlays is a map of where white Nashville has asked to be protected.

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## METHODOLOGY

The race counts come from the 2020 Census — the P.L. 94-171 redistricting file, Table P1, which reports population by race for every census block in the country. That is the finest geographic grain the Census publishes. The analysis uses the race-alone categories (white alone, Black alone, Asian alone, and so on) and leaves out the separate Hispanic-origin count, so a resident recorded as white alone here may or may not be Hispanic. Adjusting for that would probably widen the gap, since Nashville's Hispanic residents — most of whom the census records as "some other race" or

“two or more races” — are thin on the ground in the conservation districts. This analysis does not estimate by how much.

Overlay boundaries come from Metro Nashville’s published Zoning Overlay Districts file, in which each district is tagged by type. Those tagged “Neighborhood Conservation” are treated as conservation overlays, those tagged “Contextual Overlay District” as contextual. One district was tagged in error and dropped; two conservation districts whose names were missing or garbled in the file were named by hand, as Lathan-Youngs and Marlin Meadows. The file is taken as given — no ordinance was read line by line to confirm its label.

Area has to be measured on an equal-area map. The method computes thousands of small overlaps between blocks and boundaries, and on a raw latitude-longitude grid each one would be distorted and the errors would pile up. So every boundary and block was projected to the standard equal-area system for the continental United States (NAD83 / Conus Albers, EPSG:5070) before any area was measured.

A census block can sit half inside an overlay and half outside. Counting its whole population as “inside” would inflate the overlay and skew its racial mix. So each block that touches an overlay is cut at the boundary, and only a matching share of its residents is counted — the share of the block’s area that falls within the line:

$$\text{allocated count} = \text{block race count} \times \left( \frac{\text{area inside the overlay}}{\text{total block area}} \right)$$

Summed across every block an overlay touches, those shares give its estimated population by race. The method’s one assumption is that people are spread evenly across each block. It can’t be checked below the block level, and it is weakest where a block holds a park or a row of shops and few residents. Across all the overlays together the effect on the percentages is small; for a single small district built around one large empty block, it might not be. The estimate is sharpest where blocks are small and uniform, which is why the allocation is done at the block level and not the coarser block-group level. Redone at the block-group level, the conservation-contextual gap barely moves — 22.6 points against 23.3 — the check that the finer numbers hold.

The conservation overlays cover 42 mapped pieces totaling 3,316.4 acres, adopted between 1992 and 2025; the contextual overlays, 33 pieces and 2,513.7 acres, all from 2015 to 2023. The block math captured essentially all of both — 100 percent of the conservation area and 99.96 percent of the contextual. For the district-by-district numbers, the 42 conservation pieces were merged by name into 28 districts. Three of those hold only a handful of estimated residents — Lathan-Youngs about 12, Blakemore about 22, South Music Row about 81 — so their individual percentages are shaky.

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## SOURCES

### Census data

2020 Census P.L. 94-171, Table P1 (Race) — block-level counts for Davidson County. Official Census Bureau redistricting release, August 2021. Block GEOIDs and P1 counts checked against the Tennessee bulk file.

### Overlay geography

Metro Nashville [Zoning Overlay Districts](#) GeoJSON (Metro Nashville Planning Department, downloaded 2026). Type field `ZONE_DESC`: `Neighborhood Conservation` for conservation, `Contextual Overlay District` for contextual.

### Census geometries

2020 TIGER/Line tabulation blocks and block groups for Tennessee (U.S. Census Bureau), files `t1_2020_47_tabblock20` and `t1_2020_47_bg`.

### Derived analysis

Every figure in this brief is the author's own analysis, reproducible from the public sources above by following the Methodology: the 2020 Census P1 race counts allocated to the Metro overlay boundaries across the 2020 census blocks. That covers the overlay-type percentages (overall and post-2014), the conservation-versus-contextual comparison, the acreage and feature counts, the district-by-district white and Black shares, and the county totals.

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## FINDINGS

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### THE OVERLAYS ARE 75 PERCENT WHITE; THE COUNTY IS 56

The method places 23,365 residents inside the conservation overlays — 75.3 percent white, 14.5 percent Black. The county, across 715,884 residents, is 56.0 percent white and 24.2 percent Black. The overlays run 19.3 points above the county's white share, a little over a third higher in relative terms ( $75.3 \div 56.0 \approx 1.35$ ). That ratio is the "about a third whiter" in the headline.

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### THE OVERLAYS GO WHERE WHITE NEIGHBORHOODS ORGANIZE

An overlay begins with a neighborhood that wants one — the commission studies the request, the council adopts it — and the neighborhoods that organize for historic protection are white. So the overlays land where white homeowners have mobilized. The whitest are the oldest: Belle Meade Links Triangle at 97.3 percent white, Kenner Avenue 96.4, Cherokee Park 94.2, Whitland Area 92.3, Richland-West End 90.3, Hillsboro-West End 85.7, Belmont-Hillsboro 84.3 — the first districts the

city drew, on the west side, and the ones that carry most of the gap. The line from a 1947 white property-owners' league to a present-day overlay is drawn in [From the League to the Overlay](#).

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## THE ONLY BLACK-NEIGHBORHOOD OVERLAYS CAME FROM A FEDERAL GRANT

Three districts run Blacker than the county: Haynes Manor (89.1 percent Black, 5.5 percent white), Haynes Heights (85.8 percent Black, 9.5 percent white), and Lathan-Youngs (23.9 percent white, though only about a dozen people live inside its boundary). All three are recent, and all three grew out of a National Park Service grant that paid the city to document Black neighborhoods — not out of any neighborhood's campaign for protection. The other 25 of the 28 named conservation districts are whiter than the county. The 75-percent figure is the category's average; no one district is described by it. The grant histories, set beside the in-house histories of the white districts, are counted in [Counting the Silence](#).

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## THE RECENT NUMBERS ARE NOT A TURN TOWARD FAIRNESS

The overlays adopted since 2014 average less white than the older ones — 59.1 percent against 75 — and that can read as a correction. It is not one. The few Black-neighborhood overlays in that recent group are there because of the federal grant, not because the neighborhoods that seek protection have changed; set the grant aside, and the process still draws the same white districts it always has. The contextual overlays — a separate, newer zoning tool, 52.0 percent white and near the county — are a different instrument on different ground, and say nothing about who gets a conservation overlay.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

U.S. Census Bureau. *2020 Census Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File*, Table P1: Race. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021. [Decennial Census P.L. 94-171 Redistricting Data Summary Files](#).

U.S. Census Bureau. *2020 TIGER/Line Shapefiles: Tabulation Blocks, Tennessee*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, 2021. [TIGER/Line Shapefiles](#).

Metro Nashville Planning Department. [Zoning Overlay Districts](#) (GeoJSON). Nashville: Metropolitan Government of Nashville and Davidson County, downloaded 2026.

Pemberton, Alex. "2020 Race Demographics of Contextual and Conservation Overlay Districts." Author's analysis of the 2020 Census P.L. 94-171 Table P1 counts allocated to Metro Nashville Zoning Overlay Districts geography, 2026.

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## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

Pemberton, Alex. "Overlay Demographics: 'About a Third Whiter.'" Research Brief M2, *Veneers of History in Green Hills East*. alexaustinpemberton.com/journalism/veneers-of-history/#overlay-demographics-method. Accessed [date].