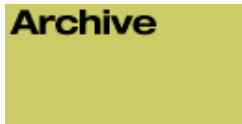


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Race divide in US cities gets wider

Special report: George Bush's America

Martin Kettle in Washington
Guardian

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Nearly 40 years after the American civil rights movement brought an end to official racial segregation, children in the United States are growing up in less racially integrated neighbourhoods than they were a decade ago, researchers have found.

Last year's census has confirmed that America is now a more multiracial society than at any time in modern history, with non-Hispanic whites now a minority in several major cities.

But researchers at the State University of New York say the same census reveals that American cities are becoming more racially divided than ever, an impression which is difficult to miss in somewhere like Washington.

Over the past decade, cities such as Detroit, Chicago and Milwaukee have all become significantly more segregated than they were in 1990, the researchers found.

The reality today is that young black Americans are growing up in a black America, while young whites are growing up in a white America.

Social integration and even contact between the two races is rare and getting rarer, especially among school-age children. The problem diminishes once young people reach college, where integrated living accommodation is enforced.

Levels of racial segregation are especially marked in urban schools and in the use of urban community services, largely as a result of "white flight" from the cities to the suburbs, the researchers found.

Even when black middle-class parents flee the cities themselves, in search of the same improvements as white people, the result is the creation of largely black suburbs, rather than integrated ones.

The researchers calculated the extent of segregation by comparing census enumeration areas in different cities between 1990 and 2000. The results show that the five most segregated cities are, in order: Detroit, Milwaukee, New York, Newark and Chicago.

The most rapid increase in segregation since 1990 has been in Milwaukee, followed by Chicago, Detroit and Birmingham. In Milwaukee, black people now account for about one third of the city's inhabitants, but nearly two-thirds of the pupils in state schools.

"It's white flight and it's increasingly difficult to have any kind of meaningful desegregation or integration," a spokeswoman for the Milwaukee school system said.

The findings underscore the extent to which racial divisions remain an integral aspect of everyday life in modern America, in spite of the progress which has been made in achieving formal equality between the black and white communities over the past 40 years.

"It's a very big problem for white children who may think that they're experiencing diversity in the country, but they are only getting a taste of it," researcher John Logan told the New York Times.

"For minority children, they're growing up in neighbourhoods where they are the majority, and that's not the world they will live in," Mr Logan added.

The researchers found that the return of informal segregation is particularly strong in the northeast and the midwest of the US. But the picture is not uniform nationwide.

In cities such as Seattle and Portland, Oregon, in the northwest, the trend is towards more integrated neighbourhoods.

Several cities in the South - such as Norfolk, Charleston, Augusta, Greenville and Jacksonville - have relatively low levels of segregation, partly because they all have large, integrated military populations.

