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Region is 2nd most segregated for youths

Black-white split trails only Detroit's, study finds

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By MIKE JOHNSON and STEVE SCHULTZE of the Journal Sentinel staff

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The four-county Milwaukee metropolitan area is the second-most segregated region in the nation for black and white youths, falling behind only Detroit, according to a new analysis of 2000 census figures.

It is a sharp change from 1990, when Milwaukee was the 49th-most segregated of 331 metro regions across the country for black and non-Hispanic white children under 18, according to the study by a team of researchers at the Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research at the State University of New York at Albany.

White movement from Milwaukee to the city's suburbs is one of the causes, said John Logan, director of the Lewis Mumford Center and one of the researchers for the study, "Living Separately: Segregation Rises for Children."

Aquine Jackson, the director of student services for Milwaukee Public Schools, calls it "white flight."

"We are losing whites through both a lower birth rate and exiting the city - white flight," he said. "It is hard to have meaningful desegregation or integration because of the demographic shift."

The region's increasing segregation "is a surprising change. It's quite unusual,"

Segregation Study

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Logan said. "It really suggests that the white population has been moving to the suburbs and the black population has not."

"Much of the segregation in this region is the lack of access to the suburbs for African-Americans. . . . The gap is really very abrupt, unlike most of the country. In most of the country, the African-American population is much more suburban," Logan said.

Across the nation, 40% of all African-Americans - and 39% of African-American children - live in suburbs, Logan said. But in the four-county region, only 5.4% of African-Americans - and only 4% of black children - live in the suburbs.

That wide difference is why the region moved from 49th to second, Logan said.

The region is made up of Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington counties, what the Census Bureau refers to as the Milwaukee-Waukesha metro area.

Earlier studies have pointed to racial and economic segregation in the Milwaukee area - for instance in 1994, a study by the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., found it the most economically segregated large U.S. city. But those studies dealt with the entire population of the metro area. The latest figures, however, refer just to children under 18.

Many major Northeastern and Midwestern metro areas, including places like New York, Chicago, Cleveland and Cincinnati, also had sharp increases in segregation between black and white children, the study says.

These changes were only partly counterbalanced by declining segregation of black from white youngsters in the Northwest (down more than 10 points in Portland, Ore., and Spokane, Wash.), and in several Sunbelt areas, where blacks represent a much smaller share of the population, the study says.

The increasing segregation among black and white children across the nation comes at a time when segregation overall declined slightly in metro areas in the 1990s and when there is growing ethnic diversity in the nation, the study says. In a study last month, the Lewis Mumford Center said the Milwaukee region was third-worst in the nation on segregation of the black-white population, behind Detroit and Gary, Ind.

Jim Rowen, an aide to Mayor John O. Norquist, said census figures show that it's the suburbs, not the city of Milwaukee, that have segregation problems. Milwaukee now has more minorities than whites, while most suburbs are overwhelmingly white, he said.

"The issue of segregation and housing patterns is really a matter of concern for the suburbs and has never been confronted much in communities like Brookfield

and Grafton and others," Rowen said.

Decline of 30,000

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of non-Hispanic white children living in Milwaukee declined by 30,000. During the same period, the number of non-Hispanic white children living in the suburbs increased slightly more than 11,000.

But even in the city, African-American and white children are living in more segregated neighborhoods, Logan said.

The same was true for major metropolitan areas in the Midwest and North, the study says.

Among the reasons for the increase in segregation is the fact that adults without children and families with children live in different kinds of neighborhoods, the researchers said.

"Although data are not yet available to examine this phenomenon, it is likely that whites living in more integrated neighborhoods tend to be childless - either young adults or parents whose children have grown up," the researchers said in the report.

"At the same time, we suspect that white families with children are disproportionately found in predominantly white settings. Past research has certainly shown that having school-aged children is a strong predictor of living in the suburbs for whites," they said.

Other possible causes for the segregation include a lack of affordable housing and multifamily housing in the suburbs or a housing market that is unwilling to accept black renters or home buyers, Logan said.

How analysis was done

The researchers used a dissimilarity index to measure integration. It captures the degree to which two groups are integrated or separated among census tracts in a given area.

The index ranges from 0 to 100, giving the percentage of one group that would have to move to achieve an even spread of the groups. A value of 0 means the two groups are evenly distributed; 100 means the groups are entirely separate. The researchers said a value of 60 or greater is considered highly segregated. Values of 40 to 50 are considered moderate levels of segregation, while values of 30 or less are considered low, they said.

In the Milwaukee region, the dissimilarity index for black and white children for 2000 was 85.9. That was up about 17 points from 1990, the largest jump in the

nation, the study says.

To achieve integration, nearly nine of every 10 black children in the region would have to pick up and move to a less black neighborhood in the four-county metro area.

Other races, however, are not as segregated in the region. Still, the study shows that segregation increased. For white and Hispanic youths, the Milwaukee region was the 20th-most segregated, up from 28th.

The dissimilarity index was 63.2, meaning six of every 10 Hispanic children would have to move to achieve integration.

For white and Asian children, the Milwaukee region was the 26th-most segregated metro area, up from 64. The dissimilarity index was 50.2, meaning five of every 10 Asian children would have to move to a less Asian neighborhood.

Local observers said the study's findings about the Milwaukee area weren't surprising, given its high segregation ranking for many years on many surveys.

"It's a continuation of the racial segregation trends that have existed for a lot of years," said Marc V. Levine, professor and director of the Center for Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

A big difference between Milwaukee and other large American cities on race: "We have absolutely no integration in our suburban areas," along with an increasingly minority central city, said Levine, who also studies population trends. Census figures released in March showed that of all the suburban communities in Milwaukee, Waukesha, Washington and Ozaukee counties, only Brown Deer had a black population of more than 10%.

The new study reflects Milwaukee's "hard legacy of discrimination and racism" and large economic disparity between the races, Levine said. Unlike other cities with large black populations, Milwaukee has almost no black middle class, he said.

There's no simple answer to why Milwaukee's blacks have fared poorly compared with those in other cities, he said, but he offered a few factors that come into play: a lack of affordable housing outside the city, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the '80s, and discriminatory lending practices.

Educational differences also may be hurting the racial split in metropolitan Milwaukee, relative to other cities, Levine said.

Recent progress seen

Bob Milbourne, executive director of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, said

that while it was generally true that Milwaukee is a highly segregated city, he believes that some progress was made in the late '90s.

"No matter how you measure it, we know Milwaukee has a severe racial segregation that needs to be addressed, and those of us who are working at it feel that we are beginning to make some progress," Milbourne said.

It boils down to economics, he said. With most blacks earning low incomes, it is unsurprising that they live in poor, segregated neighborhoods, he said. That's why the Greater Milwaukee Committee, a group of corporate and civic leaders, has emphasized projects in recent years to improve minority hiring, he said.

"The bottom line in all of this is that jobs will change the problem," he said. "The more jobs we have in the central city, the more jobs we attract minorities to, particularly at the professional level, the more this problem will disappear."

Don Kettl, a political science professor at UW-Madison who has studied the census numbers, said that continued segregation could "undermine the metropolitan area's long-term economic growth and social stability."

"Strong cities have mixed populations. High segregation - whites and blacks living in different communities - can further balkanize the boundaries separating the city from its suburbs," Kettl said. "If the central city also becomes poorer as well as smaller and more segregated, the entire metropolitan area will suffer."

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