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Dueling statistics do nothing but muddy the issue, some say

By Greg Jonsson Of the Post-Dispatch
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St. Louisans were wringing their hands just a few months ago over yet another report ranking the metro area among the most segregated regions in the nation.

But a more recent report puts the city among the top five integrated cities.

No one's saying St. Louis has improved by leaps and bounds. In fact, the researchers producing the dissenting reports have used the same data from the 2000 census. The difference is in what the researchers are really measuring and how they rank the results. It's also whether you see the cup as one-quarter full or three-quarters empty.

"There are different ways of measuring segregation, and different measures give different results," said John Farley, a sociology professor at Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville who has done his own work on the role race plays in the St. Louis region. "No one number is going to give you the entire picture."

Most of the traditional rankings are created by comparing the black-white breakdown of a region's neighborhoods to the entire region's black-white breakdown. Regions in which most residents live in neighborhoods with racial breakdowns drastically different from the breakdown of the region as a whole are considered highly segregated.

In the St. Louis region, where about 19 percent of residents are black, neighborhoods that are near 19 percent black are considered integrated. Neighborhoods that are 95 percent black or 10 percent black would be considered segregated.

Some of the segregation rankings also consider other measures of segregation, like the degree of clustering of predominantly minority neighborhoods.

The traditional measures of segregation typically put St. Louis among the most divided cities in the nation. St. Louis ranked 9th most segregated out of the 50 metro areas with the largest black populations in a report in April 2001 by the Lewis Mumford Center at the University of Albany in New York. In the same study, St. Louis ranked 13th worst out of all 331 metropolitan areas in the 2000 census.

In November, the Census Bureau's own report on segregation put St. Louis in the 4th-worst



Antwon Cotton, far left, greets to Kristin Mitchell, far right, as she and a group of her employees arrive for lunch at the South City Diner, on Grand Ave. (Karen Elshout/P-D)

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spot of the 50 largest metro areas - only Milwaukee, Detroit and Cleveland had more severe segregation, according to the Census Bureau's measure.

Researchers Lois Quinn and John Pawasarat at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee were sick and tired of seeing their fair city among the worst - along with St. Louis - in all these reports.

So Quinn and Pawasarat came up with their own definition of integration: a neighborhood in which at least 20 percent of the population is black, but not more than 80 percent. Blocks with such demographics are likely to abound in interactions between black and white people, even if the region the blocks are in is segregated overall.

For their rankings, Quinn and Pawasarat also looked at the central cities, instead of the entire metro areas that the traditional measures have looked at.

In the new study, Milwaukee ranks as the 10th most integrated of the 50 largest metro areas. And the St. Louis region comes in even better, at the 5th-best spot. While most of the city's north side and East St. Louis are overwhelmingly black, and most of the rest of the metro area is overwhelmingly white, there are broad swaths of integration, especially in south St. Louis and in north St. Louis County.

Quinn also thinks the traditional measures of segregation are based on a racist past. They were developed in the 1950s by researchers concerned about neighborhoods getting "too black," Quinn said. Quinn thought a measure of integration would be better.

"We were interested in integration, which in the past has been the opposite of segregation," Quinn said. "That's not necessarily true."

Under the traditional rankings, a region such as Salt Lake City does very well. The small African-American population - just over 1 percent in 2000 - is fairly evenly spread.

But that doesn't mean it's integrated in the way most people think of integration, Quinn said.

"If a person were seeking integrated living among blacks and whites, they wouldn't find it in Salt Lake City," she said. "They'd find it in places like St. Louis."

That's not news to some people.

"Our neighborhood is very, very mixed," said Mary Faszholz, who lives in south St. Louis. "I've lived here all my life. Growing up, it was white, but it's really changed."

Besides black residents, her neighborhood also has a growing immigrant population.

She said her two children, who attend St. Pius V Parish School, see a lot of diversity.

"Our kids didn't realize there are places where the kids all look the same" until a recent competition exposed them to some all-black and all-white groups of students, Faszholz said. "That was a surprise to them, and I like that.

"I think a lot of attention gets paid to the differences," she said. "I think we work at the day-to-day things that make us similar (in our neighborhood)."

Not everyone thinks the new ranking is such good news.

As Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel columnist Jim Stingl put it: "OK, so it looks like the extreme segregation problem is all fixed. Now if we can just readjust the numbers and cure poverty, crime, failing students, unaffordable health care and all the other problems we face."

John Logan, director of the Mumford Center, said he doesn't see much value in the University of Wisconsin rankings.

"To be honest, I can't think of a good use for this particular measure," he said. "I wouldn't use it to rank cities and especially cities that are so different."

One reason is that, as several researchers have pointed out, only cities with a large black population have a realistic chance of ranking well on the University of Wisconsin measure.

And some don't like the researchers' subjective definition of integration at all.

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"It depends on what you think of as integration," Logan said.

The focus on central cities instead of metropolitan areas also hides the degree of segregation in the area where most people live, some researchers have said.

"Look at some of the places they call integrated," Farley said. "You can't find one place in the Northeast or Midwest where 10 percent of whites live in a community that's integrated."

But Quinn said the study is supposed to encourage people to forget rankings altogether and instead look for the good and bad locally.

"The whole point of doing this ranking is to show how ridiculous rankings are," she said. "People have missed the integration in their own cities because they're focusing on these labels."

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Most integrated cities according to the report by the University of Wisconsin in Madison:

1. Virginia Beach, Va.
2. Charlotte, N.C.
3. Nashville-Davidson, Tenn.
4. Jacksonville, Fla.
5. St. Louis
6. Memphis, Tenn.
7. Columbus, Ohio
8. Indianapolis
9. Minneapolis
10. Milwaukee

Most segregated metropolitan areas according to the U.S. Census Bureau report:

1. Milwaukee-Waukesha, Wis.
2. Detroit
3. Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, Ohio
4. St. Louis
5. Newark, N.J.
6. Cincinnati
7. Buffalo-Niagara Falls, N.Y.
8. New York

- 9. Chicago
- 10. Philadelphia

Most segregated metropolitan areas according to the report by the Lewis Mumford Center at the University of Albany:

- 1. Detroit
- 2. Milwaukee-Waukesha, Wis.
- 3. New York
- 4. Chicago
- 5. Newark, N.J.
- 6. Cleveland-Lorain-Elyria, Ohio
- 7. Cincinnati
- 8. Nassau-Suffolk, N.Y.
- 9. St. Louis
- 10. Miami

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