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Study explodes myth of area's 'hypersegregation'

Researchers at UWM rethink racial arithmetic of major American cities

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For nearly four decades, researchers across the country have savaged the reputation of Milwaukee and other Northern cities, ranking these metro areas as the country's most segregated.

That assessment is dead wrong.

Milwaukee leaps from 98th to 43rd most integrated among the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas, according to a groundbreaking new study by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researchers. The researchers repudiate the so-called segregation index, calling the traditional measuring device "obsolete and racially biased."

The new study provides a far more detailed portrait of the country than was ever shown by traditional indexes, documenting more integration in U.S. neighborhoods than previously thought, particularly in Northern cities.

Developed in the mid-1950s and used widely since 1965, the segregation index long has

Closer Together

A More Integrated Milwaukee



Photo/David Joles

Artaska King (front) works out during a water aerobics class Wednesday at Noyes Pool on Milwaukee's northwest side, the most integrated part of the

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presented a paradox: It ranks metro areas with relatively large African-American populations as the "most segregated," while rating Western cities with tiny populations of blacks as more integrated. Cities such as Milwaukee, Detroit and Cleveland were labeled as bastions of "hypersegregation," while Salt Lake City, with a metro area population that is just 1.3% black, was held up as a model of integration.

The UWM study, funded by Milwaukee's Helen Bader Foundation and released this weekend, measures black-white integration by analyzing 2000 census data for all 8.2 million blocks in the United States. In contrast, the traditional segregation index analyzes decennial data using census tracts, which can include up to 8,000 people and an average of 125 blocks, with widely varying demographics.

The researchers from UWM's Employment and Training Institute caution against using any single statistic to draw conclusions about integration in complex urban areas. "These rankings often purport to measure highly complex conditions based on a single statistic, and sometimes can be very damaging for the entities ranked," they wrote.

They also stress that they are not downplaying the existence of segregation and other racial inequities in Milwaukee - or anywhere else.

But they argue that if any rankings on black-white integration are to be done, they should be based on measuring individual blocks.

"Within a census tract, you can have very different neighborhoods," said Lois Quinn, the institute's senior research scientist.

Individual blocks, the study argues, are "more sensitive to whether interaction is occurring between the races."

Quinn and fellow researcher John Pawasarat,

Milwaukee metro area in terms of black and white population.



Photo/[Jeffery Phelps](#)

Lois Quinn visits W. Daphne St. in the Heritage Estates subdivision. Quinn says the neighborhood has equal numbers of whites and blacks. She is the lead researcher of a UWM study that repudiates the so-called segregation index. She calls that index, the traditional gauge of segregation in metropolitan areas, "obsolete and racially biased."

Quotable

“ I never fell for the stereotypes. I feel Milwaukee is a fairly diverse town. ”

- **John Thomas,
47, Bryant Heights
resident**

Residential Patterns

Among the African-American population in Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington counties:

- 6% live on blocks that are less than 10% black
- 7% live on blocks that are 10-29% black
- 9% live on blocks that are 30-49% black
- 6% live on blocks that are 50-59% black
- 10% live on blocks that are 60-69% black
- 11% live on blocks that are 70-79% black
- 13% live on blocks that are 80-89% black
- 38% live on blocks that are 90-100% black

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the institute's director, also criticize the traditional segregation index for measuring one-way movement of blacks rather than the dynamic movement of many races found in a diversified metro area. And they charge that the "implicit goal" of the old index is to disperse African-Americans as widely as possible, a development that would rob blacks of political power.

"I think the index has really survived on its name," Quinn said. "Because it's called a segregation index, all of us have assumed that's what it measures. It never had the strength to measure integration. It never even defined integration."

How we see ourselves

At issue is how the United States sees and measures its progress on black-white residential integration.

The UWM researchers offer a definition that measures the percentage of residents in a metro area who live on blocks that are at least 20% black and 20% white - with the remaining 60% made up of any combination of black, white or other ethnicity.

Using that approach, Detroit rises from 100th, the least integrated of the 100 largest areas in the old index, to 57th, and Cleveland jumps from 94th to 36th. No city gets a bigger boost than Memphis, Tenn., which rises from 76th on the traditional index to fifth.

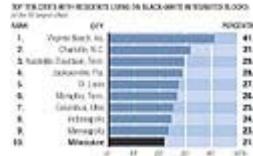
In contrast to this "20/20" approach, the traditional segregation index takes a metro area such as Milwaukee, which is 16% African-American, and computes how many blacks would have to move to disperse them evenly in each census tract of Milwaukee, Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington counties. By that standard, both a census tract with a 15% black population and one with a 20% black population would be rated as segregated - one too white, the other too black.

 [City neighborhoods:](#)
Color lines are fading



Graphic/[David Arbanas](#)

Most and Least Integrated



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Most Integrated Cities



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Mapping Integration

The Study

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The Series

 **DAY 1:** A dubious index used by researchers nationwide has long branded Milwaukee and other northern cities as the most segregated communities in America. That assessment is deeply flawed, a new study demonstrates.

 **DAY 2:** Most researchers who measure segregation begin with the premise that it's bad to have many African-Americans in a neighborhood. That's the first

"Milwaukee's metro ranking on the index is based on the 'ideal' of moving 197,890 blacks of the total 240,859 black population, or 82.16%, out of their 'too black' census tracts and into the remaining 'whiter' tracts,' " the UWM study notes.

By contrast, because Salt Lake City has so few African-Americans, proportionately few would have to move to disperse them evenly. As a result, that city rated fifth on the traditional index.

Of the top 10 metro areas on the old ranking, nine are Western cities and eight have a population that is less than 4% African-American. That percentage is less than one-third of the average for the entire country, which is 13% black.

Because the traditional index measures only what percentage of blacks needs to move to reach a mathematically perfect dispersal, it misses the variety of integration found in a metro area like Milwaukee.

Most of that integration is found in the city of Milwaukee. One of every five residents in the city (21.7%) lives on what the study calls a "black-white integrated block," meaning they have at least 20% white residents and at least 20% black residents. Most of the integrated blocks are on the city's northwest and west sides, and in neighborhoods just west of the Milwaukee River.

Many other areas show up with a sizable number of blocks that are 10%-19% black, below the UWM standard for integration, but indicative of a metro area where African-Americans are part of many neighborhoods - including the near south side, Riverwest and the lower east side. Moving beyond the city, many neighborhoods in the suburb of Brown Deer also fall into the 10%-19% black category.

But Milwaukee's suburbs still remain overwhelmingly white. As a result, the percentage of people living on integrated blocks in the four-county area is just 9.1%.

Western areas drop

Nationally, the UWM study ranks Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News, Va., where 38.6% of residents live on blocks that are at least 20% white and 20% black, as the most integrated metro area. Last

in a series of misguided goals, expectations and conclusions that fuel accepted research on segregation.

■ [DAY 3:](#) Salt Lake City scored well even though it is overwhelmingly white. Indianapolis scored poorly even though it is growing more integrated. Take a close look at these cities, and others, and it becomes apparent that complex metro areas cannot be defined by single statistical ratings.

The Aftermath

■ [Crossroads:](#) The debate continues on segregation (1/19/03)

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On the Web

■ Check out the UWM research at the Employment and Training Institute [Web site](#).

place goes to the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission area of Texas, with 0% living on black-white integrated blocks. However, because that area is 91% Hispanic, it would make more sense to rank it on based on Hispanic-white integration, Quinn noted.

Historically, segregation rankings have concentrated on black-white integration alone, so the UWM study, which contests these rankings, does likewise.

Ranking 99th in black-white integration on the new study is Ventura, Calif., where 0.1% of people live on integrated blocks. Compared with Ventura, the percentage of people living on black-white integrated blocks in the top-rated Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News area is 386 times higher. It is 91 times higher in the Milwaukee area and 76 times higher in Pittsburgh, which ranks as the median metro area for the country.

In the UWM study, the 20 most integrated metro areas all are Southern, with the exception of border areas Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. Besides Memphis, Tenn., the metro areas that jump the most in the rankings include New Orleans, which rises from 80th in the traditional index to 15th, and Birmingham, Ala., which jumps from 87th to 22nd.

"I like that approach," said Memphis Mayor Willie W. Herenton, when told of the UWM methods. "That's a broader, more inclusive measurement of racial integration."

The cities that drop the most in the UWM study are Western metro areas. Albuquerque, N.M., drops from first place to 95th, Salt Lake City drops from fifth to 98th and Orange County, Calif., drops from fourth to 97th.

Josh Ewing, a spokesman for Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson, said the low ranking for his city made sense, given the standard used in the new study.

"I would imagine there are very few blocks in the city that are 20% black. Probably zero. It's definitely a sign that there aren't many blacks here," Ewing said.

UWM's block-by-block analysis also offers another innovation: eliminating institutionalized populations (in prisons, nursing homes, mental hospitals) that do not interact with a neighborhood.

For example, the traditional segregation index, which does include institutionalized populations, ranks a census tract in the suburb of Franklin as one of the area's most integrated, with blacks accounting for about 16% of the population. In fact, most of these neighborhood "residents" are actually inmates at the House of Correction who are

African-American.

Sweeping conclusions

The traditional measurement, technically called a dissimilarity index, has been the standard way of measuring urban segregation for nearly four decades. It is used to make sweeping conclusions about housing patterns in the U.S.

Yet when asked whether the index actually measures integration, experts who have used the index concede it says little about racial interaction.

"I don't think the dissimilarity index measures the degree to which the average white is exposed to blacks in their neighborhood or the average black is exposed to whites in their neighborhood," said John Logan, a sociology professor and demographer at the State University of New York at Albany. Logan is perhaps the most quoted researcher in America on the segregation rankings.

"If you want me to say there are flaws with the dissimilarity index, yes there are," said Jacob Vigdor, assistant professor of public policy studies and economics at Duke University. Vigdor has co-written reports for the Brookings Institution using the index. "It provides information that is more digestible, but there is a cost to that."

For any local political leader attempting to measure and nurture integration, Vigdor conceded, the index is of no use. "If I were a mayor, I definitely would want more information. A block-by-block breakdown definitely gives you more detail," Vigdor said.

Vigdor's co-writer, Harvard University economics professor Edward Glaeser, agreed that a block-by-block analysis is more informative. "By and large this (segregation) index has stuck because it's the simplest and easiest to use," Glaeser said.

Vigdor, Glaeser and Logan are three of the best known of the many academic proponents of the dissimilarity index. All three said an approach measuring blocks with at least 20% white and 20% black population would be a valid way to measure integration.

Questionable goal

In most U.S. cities, an even distribution of blacks in every census tract - the goal of the traditional index - would make it difficult for African-American politicians to get elected.

Redistricting formulas normally try to create as many majority black districts as possible. The courts also have designated "black influence" districts, which range from about 25% to 40% African-American.

If the goal of even distribution were accomplished, African-Americans would not make up a majority in any political district in the top 100 metro areas and would make up less than 25% of the population (the usual cutoff for a black-influence district) in any political district in 88 of the top 100 metro areas.

"Given housing preferences and electoral successes of African-Americans in majority black neighborhoods and cities," the UWM study notes, "emphasis on dispersal of African-Americans can hardly be considered a national goal with a broad-based consensus."

The goal of an even dispersal of blacks would result in "the continued dominance of neighborhoods by an urban white majority."

Given the continued influx of Latinos and Asians to a country in which minorities are rapidly becoming more than half the population, integration might be better defined as a "successful mixing of diverse populations," the researchers suggested.

Quinn cautioned that her study is not intended to argue that segregation or racial steering has been eliminated. Over half of the United States' white population lives on blocks that are more than 90% white, and almost one-third of the black population lives on blocks that are at least 90% black, the study notes.

"The segregation is deep in this community," said Quinn, "It is very deep throughout the United States."

"But what is hopeful is that there is also significant integration, particularly in the cities with the largest black population," Quinn added. "That's a hopeful thing to build on. But we haven't been measuring that integration."

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Jan. 12, 2003.

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