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Segregation data based on racist premise, critics say

Old study methods put emphasis on dispersing blacks

By BRUCE MURPHY
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Most researchers who measure segregation begin with the premise that it's bad to have many African-Americans in a neighborhood.

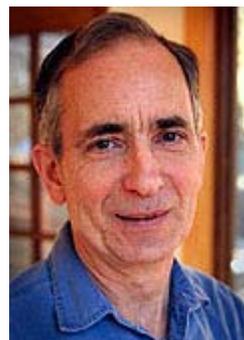
"That's one of the oldest traditions in the literature: The smaller the black population and the slower it's growing, the less the threat to whites," said Karl Taeuber, a retired University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist.

Taeuber is universally credited with popularizing the use of the "dissimilarity index," more commonly known as the segregation index, to measure integration. The index has been used for decades to portray Midwestern cities such as Milwaukee as highly segregated, while giving cities with tiny black populations - most of them in the West - a pass.

This approach is racially biased, say researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, whose new method of measuring integration suggests that the country has been misled for decades.

Closer Together

A More Integrated Milwaukee



Photo/Joe Koshollek

“ The whole notion was that when a minority population moves into a neighborhood, they're going to take

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The UWM researchers say no single statistic can portray the reality of integration, but argue that a more valid approach is to measure what percentage of residents live on blocks that are at least 20% white and 20% black. That approach gets radically different results, rating Western metro areas as the least integrated, while Midwestern cities such as Milwaukee get much higher rankings.

The difference comes because the segregation index measures what percentage of African-Americans in a given metro area would have to move in order to give each census tract the exact same distribution of black people. That method, the UWM researchers charge, fails to take into account the wide variety of neighborhoods within a census tract, and has the "implicit goal" of dispersing African-Americans.

The index goes back to the mid-1950s, but was popularized by Taeuber and his wife and co-researcher, Alma Taeuber, with their 1965 book "Negroes in Cities."

At the time, Taeuber said, "The whole notion was that when a minority population moves into a neighborhood, they're going to take over the area. We used these war-like terms, like invasion."

Sociologists argued about the "tipping point" at which a majority-white neighborhood would turn all black, with some arguing that even a few blacks could create such a transition. As a result, the goal of researchers was to disperse blacks as widely as possible.

If that were accomplished, Taeuber said: "There's no ability of a tiny population to take over an area. And it doesn't develop the infrastructure of an ethnic specific neighborhood, like the old Chinese laundries and Chinese restaurants."

'Narrow, racist attitude'

The idea that there should be no flowering of African-American

over the area. We used these war-like terms, like invasion. ”

- Karl Taeuber,
retired UW-Madison
sociologist

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The Series

SUNDAY: 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.

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

TUESDAY: 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.

On the Web

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

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culture in an ethnic neighborhood is one that few citizens of any color are likely to endorse today. And the almost certain loss of black political power, by spreading black voters so thinly, would also be controversial.

As for the tipping point, researchers who use the segregation index say there is considerable evidence since 1980 that integrated census tracts are not turning all-black. In general, said professor Nancy Denton of State University of New York at Albany, integrated neighborhoods "tend to show small percentages of more black residents. Relatively few have completely flipped" (to all black).

Meanwhile, surveys show that an increasing percentage of whites are comfortable with integrated neighborhoods. A 1996 survey shows that 70% of whites would be comfortable with a neighborhood that was 20% African-American.

Yet the implied goal of the segregation index is still to create neighborhoods that are as white as possible: Its formula requires that blacks get evened out to less than 10% of every census tract in 46 of the 100 top metro areas and less than 20% in every census tract in a total of 88 metro areas.

Shanna Smith, National Fair Housing Alliance president, and an African-American, said: "We find that a narrow, racist attitude, because it says there's something wrong with a majority-minority neighborhood. No one talks about scattering the Polish people or the Germans."

Duke University assistant professor Jacob Vigdor, co-author of a Brookings Institution study using the segregation index, conceded that the traditional emphasis on moving black people might be offensive to some.

"Maybe this is a legacy of a racist time, when people weren't as sensitive to the racial overtones," he said.

Jumping to conclusions

Some researchers have in recent years modernized their language, suggesting that the index actually measures either how many blacks or whites would have to move to gain perfect integration.

But because the index's formula can measure only one-way movement by either race, its goal of integrating largely white suburbs and moving blacks away from the urban center could be accomplished only through the movement of African-Americans. In fact, for any city census tract that is all black, the index's formula expects every person to move out, leaving a ghost neighborhood. Even African-Americans who purchase expensive downtown condominiums instead of moving

to the suburbs would simply maintain or increase the segregation rating of their metro area.

"We measure it that way because it's convenient, not because we think it's something you should strive for," Vigdor said.

But if it's not something to strive for, why measure it that way?

"My objective is just to understand what the world looks like," said Edward Glaeser, a Harvard University professor who has worked with Vigdor. "I'm not particularly interested in who's more integrated and who's less integrated."

Yet, these researchers use an index they say does not define or measure integration to declare which cities are the most segregated.

The index's proponents also caution against using it to draw any conclusions about the causes of segregation. A recent U.S. Census Bureau study emphasized this point in its very first paragraph.

There are "no policy implications" in the rankings of the segregation index, Vigdor said. "The number is just a number."

Yet index users regularly make conclusions about why segregation is higher in some areas. Glaeser, Vigdor, Denton and others repeatedly claim that the rankings show the new and growing Western cities are freer of old prejudices than the Northern Rust Belt.

"I'd deduce the Western cities have a much shorter history," Denton said. "These new neighborhoods don't come with racial identities."

But given that a metro area such as Salt Lake City is just 1.3% black, couldn't an observer take the opposite view? How do we know such a predominantly white city doesn't have policies unfriendly to blacks?

"You don't. It may be the case," said Douglas Massey, a University of Pennsylvania professor who has co-authored research with Denton.

In fact, the results of a new study by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shows that the two Western cities sampled were more likely than two Midwestern cities to use racial steering against blacks. The HUD study is based on the results of teams of testers who attempted to rent or buy homes in various cities.

In another contradiction, the index's proponents say it does not measure at the neighborhood level, yet they use it to draw conclusions about them.

In cities such as Milwaukee, Vigdor told the Journal Sentinel, the segregation index shows "you can live in an all-white or an all-black

neighborhood, but there's virtually nothing in between."

Denton offered a similar description, saying the "vast majority" of blacks in Milwaukee live in neighborhoods where they have no contact with whites. "There are exceptions to every rule," she added.

In fact, the UWM study shows that only 5% of African-Americans in the Milwaukee metro area live on all-black blocks. About 33% live on blocks that are at least 90% black and another 13% live on blocks that are 80-89% black.

But about half of the metro area's African-Americans live on blocks that are anywhere from 21% to 99% white.

Several researchers using the segregation index agreed that a block-by-block measure of black-white segregation would provide more accurate information about a metro area. But professor John Logan of State University of New York at Albany claimed that when researchers have checked segregation by blocks, "you get results that are very close to (the traditional rankings of metro areas)."

Glaeser went further, predicting that a study that specifically measured what percentage of the population lived on blocks that were at least 20% white and 20% black wouldn't change the ranking of metro areas in America.

"My guess is the correlation with the dissimilarity index would be very high," he said.

In fact, as the UWM study shows, this way of measuring integration radically changes the ranking for metro areas. Only a few of the top 100 metro areas have a rating similar to what the segregation index provided.

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Jan. 13, 2003.

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