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From the Journal Sentinel

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For decades, Milwaukee's ranking as a leader in racial segregation has acted as a hair shirt of shame. Now, as reported in a three-part series by Journal Sentinel reporter Bruce Murphy, a new study argues persuasively that the ranking is in part a bum rap.

The research, by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, amounts to a frontal attack on accepted wisdom about residential segregation in America. In pointing out pitfalls in current thinking, this research should help enrich the nation's dialogue on race.

Still, it would be a mistake to assume that residential segregation is not severe here; it is, to judge from the new study's own numbers. The institute's approach helpfully highlights integration in city neighborhoods - a detail that gets lost in the old broad-brush labeling of the city and metro area as "hypersegregated." But precious few suburban blocks are integrated, the study notes. In fact, the institute's critique does not change the statistical reality that in no other major metro area does so small a share of the black population live in the suburbs as in metro Milwaukee.

The typical method of sizing up to what extent the races live apart unfairly makes Northern cities with many black residents look bad and Western cities with few black residents look good, the study points out in an important contribution.

The researchers put forth a new approach, which measures the extent to which every block in America is integrated; the basic unit measured in the traditional approach is the census tract, which includes many blocks. Another contribution in the new research is the definition of integration: The block must be at least 20% black and 20% white to

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qualify. Traditional approaches wrongly regard majority-black blocks as not integrated, say researchers Lois Quinn and John Pawasarat.

One consequence is that Milwaukee moves up from the rear ranks on residential integration to the middle of the pack. And several Western cities fall from the front ranks to the rear.

Still, residential segregation remains a huge problem in Milwaukee and in other big cities. The chief trouble with black-white segregation is that it can serve as a vehicle for discriminating against African-Americans by delivering inferior services to them. Hence, the lack of blacks in outlying areas, where many jobs have cropped up over the last two decades, likely helps explain the high unemployment rate among African-Americans in the city.

Segregation is also problematic because it's in large measure the product of social engineering, which the real estate industry and government openly did prior to the civil rights movement and which has continued more subtly since. Yes, many African-Americans choose to live in the black community, but often because they feel that white neighborhoods are too hostile. Other ethnic groups have concentrated in specific Milwaukee neighborhoods, but eventually they have dispersed - a pattern African-Americans may well have followed without the effects of discrimination.

All in all, in turning accepted wisdom on its head, UWM's Employment and Training Institute has made an important contribution to a vital topic. The debate should continue.

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Jan. 14, 2003.

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