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Reality different from data, say blacks who feel isolated in city

By BRUCE MURPHY
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When Bonnie Dew moved to Salt Lake City in 1986, she was overwhelmed by the whiteness of the community.

"You're so isolated," said Dew, an African-American. "I would go to the mall and try to find a black person. You would just go up and say hello, you're happy to see them."

Dew's son Michael was in first grade at the time.

"He had classmates staring at him and wanting to touch his hair," his mother recalled. "They just gawked at him."

Today, Dew is director of the state Office of Black Affairs, based in Salt Lake City. In a state with more than 2 million people, just 19,481 are African-American, with most living in the Salt Lake City area. Even there, blacks make up only 1.3% of the metro area population.

When told Salt Lake City ranks as America's fifth most integrated metro area on a popular index used by academic researchers, Dew and other African-Americans in Utah were

Closer Together Salt Lake City



Photo/Erick Delphenick

Bonnie Dew is director of Utah's Office of Black Affairs, based in Salt Lake City, which has been ranked as one of the nation's least segregated cities. But in a state with more than 2 million people, just 19,481 are black.

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surprised.

"The reality isn't what the data would suggest," said Ron Coleman, a professor of history and ethnic studies at the University of Utah who is black.

Even City Council Chairman Dave Buhler, who is white, was taken aback.

"It does seem a little strange," he said.

For decades, American metro areas such as Milwaukee, Indianapolis and Detroit were denigrated as the most segregated for African-Americans, while places such as Salt Lake City were seen as unencumbered by such problems.

No more.

A new study by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee turns conventional wisdom upside-down, finding Northern cities with significant African-American populations are much more integrated - in terms of blacks and whites - than Western cities.

The study, by Lois Quinn, senior research scientist, and John Pawasarat, director of the UWM Employment and Training Institute, for the first time rates metro areas based on integration of individual blocks, where most interaction occurs among neighbors. The old index analyzed census tracts, which can include up to 8,000 people and an average of 125 blocks, which vary greatly in their level of integration.

Using the new approach, the West rates poorly, with nine of the 10 least-integrated areas, including the metro areas around several California cities, such as Ventura and San Jose. The study ranks only two Western metro areas in the top 25 for black-white integration: Vallejo-Fairfield-Napa, Calif., 21st, and Tacoma, Wash., 23rd. Salt Lake City plummets from fifth to 98th place in integration among the largest 100 metro areas.

African-Americans, based on an analysis of all 8.2 million blocks in America:

- Nearly a fourth (23.4%) live on blocks where at least 20% of residents are white and 20% are black.
- An additional 13.6% live on majority-white blocks where blacks are less than 20% of the population.
- 21.7% live on blocks where they are mixed with Latino or Asian populations as well as whites in a variety of combinations.
- 41.3% live on blocks that are more than 80% black.

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- **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

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The new rating is closer to the perceptions of Coleman and Dew.

"There's never been a strong attraction for African-Americans to come to this state," said Coleman.

Dew said that in her travels, "I've tried to get (African-American) families to move here from other cities. They just laugh at me."

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](#).

Both Dew and Coleman moved to Salt Lake City in 1973, and both have remained there because of career considerations. Both think the city has improved since they arrived.

Still, African-Americans remain isolated and lacking in political power and cultural identity.

One notable example: The local NAACP gets accused of not supporting African-Americans.

"They feel like there are so few blacks, they try to connect to Hispanics and Polynesians and whites," Dew said.

As a result, she said, "many blacks feel abandoned."

Pam Perlick, a researcher for the University of Utah Bureau of Economic and Business Research, said that under the old system - measuring segregation by census tract - Salt Lake City becomes "falsely integrated."

Most blacks tend to be found in certain neighborhoods, noted Perlick, who is white, but because of their small numbers, the tracts where they live don't look much different from others.

Harvard professor Edward Glaeser defends the positive ranking for Salt Lake City, arguing that even though the number is small, blacks are still better dispersed than in other cities - and under the traditional system of measuring segregation, dispersion is the key.

But Quinn, whose new study offers a stinging critique of the segregation index, said, "This is a formula whose rankings inevitably reward communities for having less African-Americans."

History of racism

Settled by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Utah has had a Mormon-dominated culture that was long unfriendly to blacks. The religion was rife with negative images of dark-skinned and black people. Though permitted as members, African-Americans were

barred from leadership roles.

In 1978, church President Spencer W. Kimball had a revelation that rejected these past teachings.

"Change has indeed come since then," said Darius Gray, president of The Genesis Group, a Salt Lake City-based group within the church that has advocated for diversity. "The community is more accepting, more diverse in its thought, if nothing else."

"I love it here now," said Gray, who is black. "But it's not been without struggle."

Dew pointed to the creation of her Office of Black Affairs as a sign of Utah's awakening to issues of diversity. "I really do think the governor supports this office," she said of Gov. Mike Leavitt.

Other signs are less positive: The state's two U.S. senators, Republicans Bob Bennett and Orrin Hatch, both have consistently scored an F on the NAACP's rating of their records on civil rights. The Salt Lake City Council has no minority members.

Coleman noted that the Mormon church has aggressively proselytized in Latin America, Africa and in Pacific Island countries, making it more diversified internationally. As a result, there has been an influx of Hispanics and Pacific Islanders settling in Salt Lake City. But the black population has grown more slowly.

Dew said she gets kidded about it when she meets African-Americans in other cities.

"They'll say, 'Wow, you left one person in charge there - it's just you and Karl Malone, right?' "

Malone, the longtime star of the Utah Jazz pro basketball team, is one of the most popular people in the state.

Of course, the team nickname is filled with irony: It was transplanted from the franchise's original home, New Orleans. Jazz music and other examples of black culture are largely foreign imports, exotic rarities in Salt Lake City.

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

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