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Even in the most integrated city, race is still a thorny issue

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Virginia Beach, nearby cities tell complex story of black-white politics

By **BRUCE MURPHY**
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Last Updated: Jan. 14, 2003

If there is any agreement between the old and new integration rankings, it is that both rate the South as more integrated than the Midwest or Northeast.

The new study by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee researchers is more emphatic: 18 of the 20 most integrated metro areas are Southern, and the two exceptions, Baltimore and Washington, are border cities. The study, which analyzes black-white integration by block rather than by the old method of measuring census tracts, gives the top ranking to the Norfolk-Virginia Beach-Newport News metro area.

But the reality of Virginia Beach is that a high level of residential integration hasn't yielded political power for black residents. By contrast, nearby Norfolk, with less integration, has achieved a remarkable level of power sharing between the races.

The two cities may be united in the same metropolitan area by the U.S. Census Bureau. But their differing realities show

Closer Together Virginia Beach



Photo/Kelly Presnell

Former Virginia Beach city councilwoman Louisa Strayhorn says that despite the city's high integration rating, it's hard for blacks to be elected there. "Integration by itself doesn't tell the story of what the city is like."

Quotable

“ Naval families live more where other naval families

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how complex a given metro area can be, and how superficial a portrait is provided by any single statistical rating.

Open discussion in Norfolk

Norfolk, one of Virginia's oldest cities, boasts the largest naval base in the world. Segregation researchers often note that cities where the armed forces have bases have higher levels of integration: The military blends races better than any other organization.

"Naval families live more where other naval families are located," noted Norfolk City Manager Regina V.K. Williams. "That overrides race."

Because military personnel are frequently reassigned, there also is high turnover in neighborhoods, so they are not as locked into traditional patterns that can lead to segregation.

But Norfolk still faced white resistance to school desegregation in the 1960s. Many white families fled, and the percentage of white students in Norfolk's public schools has dropped from 63% in 1970 to 27% today. To combat white flight, Norfolk's political leaders decided to move away from busing, eliminating it for elementary schools in 1986, and for middle schools last year.

Norfolk now is 48% white and 44% black, with 8% other minorities. A court order ended at-large election of City Council members in 1991 and required election by districts, which increased black representation.

Today, the council has four white and three black members. Mayor Paul Fraim is white and City Manager Williams is black. Other African-American officials include the school superintendent, chief of police, head of the city housing authority and city auditor.

Norfolk has some integrated neighborhoods,

are located. That overrides race. ”

- Regina V.K. Williams,
Norfolk city manager

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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.

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some that are largely white and well-to-do,
and some that are largely black and low-income.

As Williams put it: "Norfolk is, within the region, more the urban core. Virginia Beach looks and feels more suburban."

Race is a frequent subject in Norfolk. The City Council initiated a series of monthly discussions on race-related issues. The long list of issues cut both ways, including racial profiling, intimidation of white children in public schools and minority hiring.

"We have good race relations, despite the fact that we are a Southern city," Fraim said. "We talk about it all the time. We work on it."

Church and civic groups also have gotten involved. Donald Porter, the head of a retail association, helped create a group called Norfolk United Facing Race. A wide range of citizens have gone through the program.

Virginia Beach is Old South

Perhaps because Virginia Beach is only 19.5% African-American, its dialogue about race has been less open. Long a resort area, where blacks were not allowed to rent beach chairs at the oceanfront until the mid-1960s, Virginia Beach also includes rural areas. The city incorporated by merging with Princess Anne County, which was mostly farmland in 1963, and attracted white families fleeing the Norfolk schools.

Some of the new homes were also bought by African-Americans. On average, blacks in Virginia Beach are better educated, have higher incomes and are more likely to own their own home than those in Norfolk.

Virginia Beach also has a remarkable level of residential integration. The segregation index ranks the city as less segregated than most in America. And the new ranking by UWM rates Virginia Beach as the most integrated city in America, with 41% of people living on blocks where at least 20% of the residents are white and 20% are black.

In the 1980s, Virginia Beach was America's fastest-growing city east of the Mississippi. Its newly settled areas were a model of natural integration, according to Mayor Meyera E. Oberndorf.

"We all came to the neighborhoods together regardless of our race, religion or nationalities," she recalled.

But that's not the view of others.

"The fact that you have people of different races who live side by side,

that's fine and dandy," noted Louisa Strayhorn, an African-American who served on the City Council. "But what does it mean? Integration by itself doesn't tell the story of what the city is like."

The mayor, the city's congressional and General Assembly representatives, and eight of nine City Council members are white. The council has just one minority, of Filipino-American descent.

Although council members serve a particular district, they must get elected at large, meaning each is elected by a majority of people in the entire city, whose voters are mostly (73%) white.

In 1994, Strayhorn managed to get elected, becoming only the second black council member to serve in the last 40 years. But she lasted only one term. Although the council race is non-partisan, Strayhorn was seen as a Democrat and alienated the white Republicans who dominate the city.

"We had taken dead aim on Louisa," Republican Virginia legislator Leo Waldrup told a local newspaper. She was a rising Democrat, he added, "and that's clearly enough for us to lock and load."

For Strayhorn, her 1998 re-election effort is a painful memory.

"I had phone calls saying, 'We're going to make sure that nigger doesn't get elected.' After the election, people would drive by and say, 'See, nigger, we said we'd get you,' " she recalled.

Armed with new census data, local black leaders worked with Norfolk State University political science professor Rudolph Wilson to pressure the City Council to drop the at-large system and redistrict, in order to increase minority representation.

Oberndorf said redistricting was useless. "We tried to find a specifically minority area but we couldn't, because everybody is so well distributed," she said.

Alternative plans

Wilson did provide different redistricting plans, including one with two districts that were heavily (40%) minority. But Oberndorf contended that it was accomplished by gerrymandering.

Anita Hodgkiss, a lawyer for the Washington, D.C.-based Lawyers Commission for Civil Right Under Law, believes the proposed districts were not unusually shaped.

But the mayor and council rejected any changes proposed by the advocates of increased black representation.

Hodgkiss, who has argued voting rights cases for 17 years, was ready to launch a court battle. But in the 2002 election, Ronald Villanueva won office.

The fact that he was a minority whom many African-Americans supported would make it harder to win the case, Hodgkiss said.

Georgia Allen, president of the local NAACP, thinks the city's business leaders handpicked Villanueva.

Still, she remains committed to working for change.

Even Strayhorn, despite her bitter defeat, remains committed to Virginia Beach, where she has now lived for 20 years.

"I came here from Boston," she noted. "This is heaven compared to Boston."

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

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