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Can't shake impression of city's segregation

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Jim Stingl

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This is going to be trickier than I thought.

I spent Tuesday morning calling America and demanding that it take back all that stuff it said about Milwaukee being the most racially segregated place in the country, if not the universe.

Because there's a new study in town, baby. It was grown right here in the fertile academic loam of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and it was reported in this newspaper in a three-part series this week by reporter Bruce Murphy.

Looking at census data in a new way, the study suggests we all need to stop chanting, "We're number one! We're number one!" because the new reality is that there are 57 metro areas in the United States where blacks and whites live more apart than in greater Milwaukee. And looking at just the city itself, Milwaukee ranks 10th most *integrated*.

Even our aldermen here are indicted in that spirit - first someone black, then someone white.

OK, so it looks like the extreme segregation problem is all fixed. Now if we can just readjust the numbers and cure poverty, crime, failing students, unaffordable health care and all the other problems we face.

Anyway, I didn't get far trying to correct the nasty impression out there that Milwaukee is "most segregated" or "hypersegregated" or "all the whites over here and all the blacks over there."

"I haven't read the series yet," said Los Angeles Times reporter Stephanie Simon, who recently visited Milwaukee and last month

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wrote a very long story under the headline, "Milwaukee is the most segregated metro area, data show. Its black residents face glaring inequities in income, schools and home loans."

Simon said she wouldn't take anything back until she read Murphy's series. And even then, she said, "I don't think there's any dispute about poverty, infant mortality, income and employment" and the way African-Americans here come out on the short end on those issues.

Another title town

Carol Hunter, the executive editor of the Green Bay Press-Gazette, was kind enough to call me back to discuss an editorial her paper ran in October calling Milwaukee "the state's largest and most segregated city."

The information in that editorial most likely came from the Journal Sentinel, she said.

Oh. Well, ah, yes, we may have reported that once or twice or maybe a few thousand times over the years.

She deadpanned that her paper might be willing to run a small clarification, but nothing like the "three-day correction" my newspaper just ran. We didn't get around to discussing the racial makeup of Green Bay, where blacks are most visible on autumn Sunday afternoons out on Lambeau Field.

I'm still waiting to hear back from The Business Journal in Minneapolis-St. Paul, which reported recently that "Milwaukee earned the dubious distinction of being America's most segregated metropolitan area in terms of housing opportunities for blacks."

Same with the Orlando Sentinel and the American-Statesman in Austin, where "city limits" means something different from what it does here. Study or no study, Milwaukee's "iron ring" of suburbs is pretty darn white. Integration, unless it's preceded by "court ordered," is not a word that comes to mind outside the city.

Even the authors of the new study would admit there's plenty of room for improvement in race relations. Let's take small steps. Let's continue to shop together in peace - black and white - at Mayfair Mall.

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Jan. 15, 2003.

Jim Stingl Archive

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