For some, study belies racial realities

Findings can't dispel sense of inequality's persistence in metro area

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A new study showing Milwaukee is not hypersegregated could change the city's image, some believe, but there is vigorous debate over whether it should.

The groundbreaking study by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute found Milwaukee ranked 43rd in the level of integration among the nation's top 100 metropolitan areas. The study examined housing patterns on a block-by-block basis, while a previous study - known as the segregation index - compared cities by census tract and consistently ranked Milwaukee as one of the most segregated metro areas.

"It gets us off the dime of just looking at where we stand on segregation and allows us to look at how to create better opportunities for people of all races," Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker said.

Larry Moore, executive director of the Metcalfe Park Residents Association, saw it differently. "No whites live on my blocks," he said of the north side area he serves. He noted the study showed a high percentage of African-Americans still live on blocks that are more than 70% black.

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"I don't think it means we've waved a magic wand over this city and all the problems will go away," state Rep. Shirley Krug (D-Milwaukee) said.

Julia Taylor, president of the Greater Milwaukee Committee, said it "changes the view of the city; it shows neighborhoods are more diverse. I don't think it changes the view of the suburbs."

The UWM study found that the city was the 10th most integrated of the nation's 50 largest cities, with 21.7% of residents living on integrated blocks. In the rest of the four-county area, though, only 0.7% of residents live on integrated blocks.

For some, the argument over statistics misses the point.

"Segregation is really an emotional issue," said state Rep. Spencer Coggs, (D-Milwaukee). "Two lofty theories that contradict each other don't get to the heart of the pain people feel over segregation. It seems to me you couldn't convince anyone in town that Milwaukee doesn't suffer from segregation."

Others agreed that changing the city's image won't be easy.

"While it's good to know we are not the most segregated, we have a lot of work to do to overcome the image that we are still segregated and have all these problems that impact on the African-American community," said Ralph Hollmon, president of the Milwaukee Urban League. "It goes back to the high number of African-Americans who don't have a job and are living in poverty," he noted.

Former Ald. Terrance Herron, who has moved to Washington, D.C., said his daughter, who attends Ohio State University, had no interest in returning to Milwaukee because of the social scene here.

"She'd like to go to a club, but the problem with all the (African-American oriented) clubs is we don't have economic diversity. It's all low-income people."

Doug Neilson, president of the Greater Milwaukee Convention and Visitors Bureau, noted that the number of upscale, black-owned or integrated clubs in and around downtown has increased.

"There's Swank, Onyx, Velvet Room, Caroline's," he said.

The UWM study also has focused attention on the city's northwest side, where much of the integration in the metro area is found. "It's one of the region's best-kept secrets," said Jeff Browne, head of the Public Policy Forum. "I live on the northwest side, and I honestly can't remember an article that's been positive about the area."

Milwaukee historian John Gurda said the northwest side was key to
understanding the true level of integration here. He argued the poor rating for Milwaukee using the traditional segregation index may mostly reflect the fact that middle-class African-Americans were moving to suburban-style housing on annexed, vacant land on the northwest side rather than to suburbs.

"Milwaukee is virtually alone among northern cities in having agricultural land in the city," he noted.

Shelley Jurewicz, who runs Young Professionals of Milwaukee, said the group intends to use the UWM study as the focus of its second "Cafe Mosaic," which is intended to foster diversity among young professionals in Milwaukee. Jurewicz said she expected some "spirited" discussions.

Indeed, the issue has divided academics at UWM, noted Chancellor Nancy Zimpher. She said she expected "robust debate" over the study's findings.

Does she believe Milwaukee is hypersegregated? "I think some day we might have to let go of that if we continue to probe deeply at this kind of information," Zimpher said.