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The Cost of Segregation || Part III: Where We're Headed

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Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Jonathan Wolbert, 9, of Flushing, Mich., studies a photograph included in a Smithsonian Institution exhibit celebrating African-American history during a stop in Pontiac this summer. Experts say a key to integration is for younger people to attach less importance to race.

Future

Attitudes, habits stall integration progress

Migration trends make it unlikely living patterns will change in Metro Detroit

By Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

The for-sale signs last spring told Laura McMullen an awful truth: The walls separating black from white in Metro Detroit still stand.

McMullen, 48, a mother of three, said she thought little of it when a mixed-race couple agreed to buy a home in her Livonia neighborhood. Others weren't as accepting.

"A couple of the neighbors were very upset," she said, even though the couple never moved to the neighborhood.



The Cost of Segregation

▶ Jan. 14: Racial Attitudes

The Detroit News looks at Metro Detroit's sometimes startling attitudes toward segregation today, the extent and reasons for racial separation and how they play out in the lives of families white and black.

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"There were people who decided they were moving because of it."

That's a glaring example of the immense barriers of history, attitude and demographics that make it unlikely Metro Detroit will lose any time soon its place as one of the nation's most segregated communities.

There are some signs of potential change: The possibility of shifting attitudes on race; greater awareness of the myths that spark segregation and the costs it imposes; and indications that some Metro Detroit communities could, over the coming decades, become and remain integrated.

But against those ripples of change, segregation is a massive tide, say scholars who study the issue.

"We'll continue to see the trends we've seen," said Wayne State University demographer Kurt Metzger, head of the school's Michigan Metropolitan Information Center.

That means a growing, but small and concentrated, African-American population in the suburbs, and continued decline in the white population of Detroit.

It means Southfield and Oak Park, which rapidly have become the capitals of Metro Detroit's growing black suburbia, will continue to attract blacks and lose whites, as will a smattering of other suburban neighborhoods. And cities such as Livonia and Warren, now overwhelmingly white, will continue to be so.

It means a metropolis that continues to pay the price of segregation: economic disadvantage for blacks; sprawling, traffic-choked suburbs for whites; and children ill-prepared for the multicultural future that awaits them outside this region's segregated borders. It means millions of blacks and whites who seem content with continued segregation.

It means, in short, a Metro Detroit far short of what people like Heaster Wheeler, executive director of the Detroit NAACP, hold out as an ideal.

"It would be a community where there's not this big obsession with race," Wheeler said. "An ideal Metro Detroit would have a fairly balanced mix of people, where races were represented proportionate to their numbers in any community and there were not these concerns about that fact that somebody happens to be black, that somebody happens to be Hispanic, or somebody happens to be white."

That Metro Detroit is a long way off.

► [Jan 21: Paying For Preferences](#)

Segregation is the norm for Metro Detroiters, but it carries heavy costs. From segregated schools to stagnant property values to a lack of exposure to the nation's increasing diversity, we pay for our preferences.

► **Today** : Where We're Headed

Are we fated to continue living apart? If so, what will the future toll be? The Detroit News looks at the factors that could break down racial barriers, the factors that keep them standing and how living patterns in other metropolitan areas have changed.

More On WDIV/TV4

Watch for special reports on the Cost of Segregation today at 5 p.m. and 11 p.m. on WDIV/TV4.

Public discussion on segregation

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Keynolds Farley, probably the leading researcher on Metro Detroit's racial residential segregation, said he thought the 2000 census would bear better news for those concerned about segregation here.

"On the basis of what I saw between '80 and '90, I thought that around the country there would be greater decreases in segregation," said Farley, a University of Michigan researcher and co-author of *Detroit Divided*, a look at Metro Detroit's segregation based on the 1990 census. In Metro Detroit and elsewhere, he said, factors such as the rapid decline in the number of all-white neighborhoods foretold a rising acceptance of African Americans in places they had never before lived.

What has happened in Metro Detroit, however, is that most blacks moving to the suburbs have settled in a few neighborhoods in a handful of cities, especially Oak Park and Southfield. And the number of integrated neighborhoods -- those with substantial populations of both blacks and whites -- has actually fallen.

"There will be continued movement of blacks to the suburbs," Farley said. "And given our history, many areas identified as having a substantial black population will be unattractive to many whites."

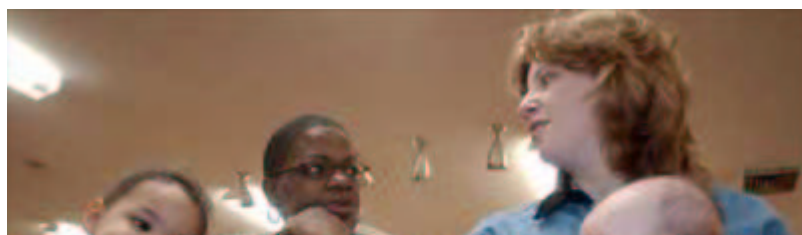
This, Farley and others say, is one of the key factors blocking any real decline in Metro Detroit segregation: the desire of blacks to move to neighborhoods where lots of blacks already live, and the tendency of whites to leave such neighborhoods and to avoid them when looking for a new home.

A Detroit News/WDIV poll of Metro Detroiters showed substantial numbers of both races, and particularly whites, avoid neighborhoods with large numbers of people of races different than their own. Barely half of whites said they would move into a neighborhood regardless of its racial makeup.

People had even less confidence in the willingness of their neighbors to live in a diverse neighborhood.

"People probably overestimate" their tolerance for living with other races, said Ralph Rappuhn, 60, of Grosse Ile. He said he and others associate black neighborhoods with economic troubles, lack of good jobs and poor city services, and that the only way to break down those barriers is to improve the economic status of the area.

Still, experts point to Southfield, a prosperous community where high- and middle-income blacks have moved into spacious, expensive suburban homes while whites have rapidly moved out, as evidence that income and other economic issues aren't as large a factor as many believe. And those waiting for improved incomes among blacks to crack segregation may be disappointed: Segregation levels for blacks and whites living in poverty are almost identical to levels among wealthier people.





Donna Terek / The Detroit News

JeDonna Dinges, left, talks with Tracie Berghaus at a potluck dinner in East English Village. The white population has risen in parts of Detroit, but not enough to reverse decades of white flight.

Nation is concerned

Breaking down such feelings may seem daunting, but some people who have studied segregation and attitudes toward it are more optimistic.

First, as Detroit News/WDIV polling from before and after Sept. 11 shows, it's possible the horrific events of that day have unified the nation in ways that lower racial barriers. While less than 5 percent of respondents in a January poll said they've changed their minds about black-white relations, the numbers citing factors such as property values and crime as reasons to avoid integrated neighborhoods fell after Sept. 11.

Steve Mitchell of Mitchell Research and Communications Inc., which conducted the polls, pointed to a question about fear of discrimination. In August, 37 percent of those surveyed cited such fears as a reason not to live with neighbors of different races. In January, that fell to 5 percent.

"That's big movement," Mitchell said. "There have been significant changes in the perceptions of Metro Detroiters. The question still remains: How long will those feelings last? I don't think anyone knows the answer."

More durable, perhaps, is the hope that succeeding generations will attach less importance to race.

"Younger people will be less inclined to live in segregated patterns in the future," said University of Michigan demographer William Frey. "I think more will wind up living in the same suburbs, sharing the same communities and the same schools."

John Logan, a researcher at the State University of New York at Albany, said he was encouraged by results of a nationwide survey by the Pew Center last year.

It showed that most Americans were aware of the 2000 census revelations about segregation, and that about 70 percent of those surveyed said they were concerned about how segregated many places still are.

The picture looks somewhat different in Metro Detroit, however. More than half of both blacks and whites in The Detroit News/WDIV poll said they consider segregation a good idea at least some of the time; 12 percent said it's a good idea all the time or usually. Even those

surrounded by the effects of segregation -- abandoned homes and failing city services -- often say they don't see an issue.

"It doesn't concern me," was the verdict of Virginia Robinson, 73, of Detroit. Robinson, who is black, said segregation is an issue that just doesn't touch her everyday life.

Frey and others point to the hope that younger people will be less affected by historically segregated housing patterns. While The News' poll found little difference in attitudes of different age groups, there are clear signs that more Metro Detroiters are willing to break down the invisible barrier of race.

Farley said an increasing number of African Americans living in mostly white neighborhoods could be an important precursor to a more integrated future.

There are now more than 20,000 Metro Detroit blacks who live in neighborhoods that are 95 percent or more white, and they could help shape the attitudes of others, Farley said. Just as the hostile receptions blacks received in cities such as Dearborn and Warren in past decades discouraged other blacks from trying to live there, these African-American pioneers could help convince other blacks to move into areas they once would have avoided.

Testing integration

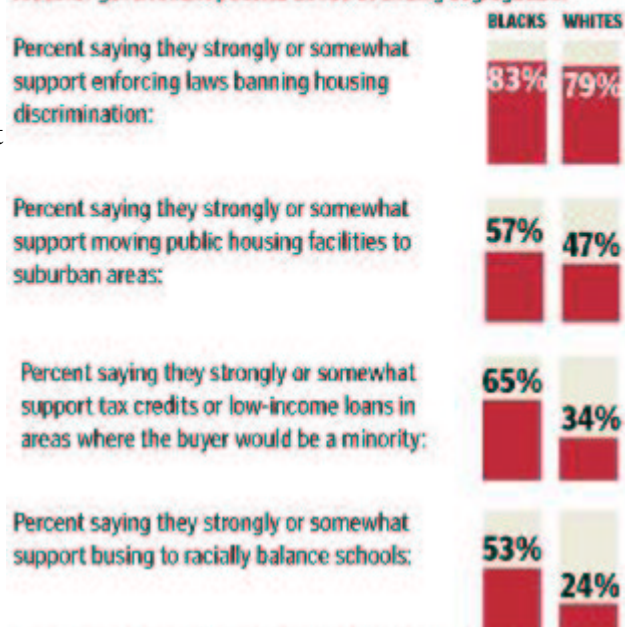
Then, of course, whites would have to show a new willingness to remain in neighborhoods with growing black populations. That hasn't happened in places such as Southfield and Oak Park, where neighborhoods have rapidly shifted from white to black.

The next test ground, experts say, is in places such as Farmington Hills and West Bloomfield Township. Already, African Americans make up substantial percentages of many neighborhoods in those communities.

"We've made it plain that an integrated, balanced community is a good thing," said Farmington Hills City

Government's role

A Detroit News/WDIV poll found little support among whites most for government policies aimed at ending segregation:



Source: An August poll of 650 residents by Mitchell Research and Communications Inc. The poll has a margin of error of ± 4.4 percentage points.

Signs of a thaw?

A poll of 206 residents earlier this month shows signs that some attitudes about black-white relations may be changing since the Sept. 11 attacks, if only slightly:

Percent saying their feelings had changed	Percent saying they view individuals of	Percent saying they view individuals of

Farmington Hills City Manager Steve Brock, whose city has 5,700 blacks, four times as many as in 1990.

That's a plus in the mind of Ann Hill, 38, a mother of two.

"I think everybody here celebrates it," Hill said as she sipped coffee at a neighborhood holiday party in Barrington Green subdivision. The neighborhood is home to many ethnicities -- people from India, Pakistan, Japan, Russia -- and a small but growing African-American population of about 5 percent. "I think it's great, and I think most people who live here think it's great."

It's important, Hill said, that her children go to schools with students of many backgrounds. "That's just how the world is," she said. "This will prepare them for the real world."

Debra Canty, a mother of three, moved to the neighborhood three years ago from Detroit. As an African American, she said, the first few months in a neighborhood of whites and Asians were tough. "We're all used to what we grew up with," she said.

"But my neighbors have been great," she said. "I think everybody, black and white, needs to be more open. We shouldn't be so clustered together. I think we can all live together as one big -- and yes, I'll be optimistic -- happy family."

What path to follow

Farmington Hills has taken steps to make that happen.

The city has a decade-old multicultural commission that has studied other communities, such as the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, that have established policies aimed at maintaining integrated neighborhoods.

Brock said he believes his residents would be less comfortable with aggressive integration policies such as those in Shaker Heights, where residents are offered benefits to stay in or move to neighborhoods where their race is under-represented.

"It's more making known there's a tolerance here for all colors and creeds," Brock said. "When you start talking about official policies and programs -- that's a more difficult thing."

Indeed, it's difficult to imagine much support, among voters or politicians, for government action to promote integration.

The News' poll found low support for any of several public policies that have been tried here in the past, or are now in place elsewhere.

Roughly half of those surveyed said they would support using low-interest home loans to encourage whites to move to black neighborhoods and blacks to white areas.

About half also supported dispersing public housing from inner-city neighborhoods to the suburbs, though some experts said it's likely support would fall if such ideas were actually proposed.

And while the poll showed very limited support for busing to integrate



And while the poll showed very limited support for busing to integrate schools, people of both races strongly favored tougher enforcement of laws banning discrimination in housing.

While there is disagreement on how much segregation can be blamed on discrimination, experts such as SUNY-Albany's Logan saw promise in that support.

The 80 percent approval, Logan pointed out, is about as high as public support for last year's federal income tax refund.

"There is very widespread public sentiment against discrimination, even though there tends to be not much sense that discrimination is a factor in causing segregation," Logan said.

"But as people begin to become more familiar with the extent to which segregation continues, you've got the potential to start building consensus toward some solutions."



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

Erin Mastro, left, and Congetta Hines chat during class at Ferndale High School. A growing number of African Americans living in mostly white suburbs offers hope for a more integrated future.

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