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# The Cost of Segregation || Part I: Racial Attitudes

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Donna Terek / The Detroit News

Janine and Andrew Gurka built a home in Livonia, which is 95 percent white. In other cities "everything was worse than what we had or too expensive," she said.

### The present:

## Mistrust keeps races living apart

Subtle perceptions shade decisions on where to live, reinforcing racial divide

By Ron French / The Detroit News

Caroline Mallory and her husband asked about the color of their neighbors when they looked for a home. Janine Houle-Gurka and her husband didn't.

Yet the outcome was the same for the two middle-class families: The African-American Mallorys now live in Southfield, the region's premiere majority-black suburb, while the Houle-



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Gurka family, who are white, live in Livonia, the whitest city of more than 100,000 people in America.

This is the murky landscape of segregation in Metro Detroit: We choose our homes for complex and intertwined reasons, yet the cumulative effect of those decisions leaves most residents living in racially separate communities.

"Face it -- this is all about race," said Joe Darden, a professor of urban affairs at Michigan State University. "(But) people don't want to talk about the boogeyman of race."

Segregation at the beginning of the 21st century doesn't involve restrictive covenants or cross burnings, or, in most cases, even conscious intentions. Public surveys as well as residents interviewed by The Detroit News say that race plays little or no role in their home choices. Yet the reasons often cited, such as income, home values, crime and quality of schools are shaded by perceptions of those with different color skin. Those perceptions are part true, part myth, and part legacy from a time when racism was rampant.

**Income matters little**

The most widespread assumption -- and one of the most inaccurate -- is that blacks are concentrated in cities such as Detroit and Highland Park because they don't have the income to live elsewhere; Metro Detroit, the argument goes, is segregated by income, rather than race.

Home values poke holes in that assumption.

\* The average sale price of homes in majority-black Southfield is



Max Ortiz / The Detroit News

**Michael and Caroline Mallory of Southfield wanted a racially mixed neighborhood like the one in which Caroline grew up in Detroit for their children, Kyle, in dad's lap; Andrianna, left; Michael; and Morgan, in mom's arms.**

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\$155,000, close to the similar yet heavily white suburb of Sterling Heights, \$167,000.

\* The average home in Oak Park (47 percent black) sells for more than in adjacent Ferndale (less than 1 percent black).

\* The average home value in Highland Park (93 percent black) is 50 percent higher than in Hamtramck (15 percent black).

Income data from the 2000 census won't be released until later this year. But a landmark study of the 1990 census by U-M sociologist Reynolds Farley found that income level accounted for only about one-sixth of Metro Detroit's segregation; education level accounted for one-fourteenth.

It was race, rather than issues of economics, crime or education, that played the major role in determining where Metro Detroiters lived, Farley concluded. Whites prefer to live around whites, and blacks prefer to live around blacks.

### **Some fears self-fulfilling**

Historically, the average sale price of homes in majority-black communities is lower than that of many white communities. In black neighborhoods, home values traditionally rose less because more than 70 percent of potential buyers, whites, didn't want to live there.

Between 1970 and 1990, homes in Detroit lost almost half their value, after adjusting for inflation, according to research by David Rusk, a nationally renowned city planner.

The fear among white home buyers, that they might lose their investment if they bought in black neighborhoods, became a self-fulfilling prophecy, Rusk said.

But that pattern ended abruptly in Metro Detroit in the past six years, during which homes in many black neighborhoods appreciated faster than those in white neighborhoods, shrinking the historical gap in values. For example:

\* Southfield grew from 29 percent to 54 percent black in the decade. Yet since 1994, the average home value has grown at the same pace as Livonia.

\* Oak Park went from 34 percent to 47 percent black in the decade, yet saw its average home values more than double, from \$61,000 in 1994 to \$127,000 this year. It's a higher increase than in the nearby communities of Royal Oak (77 percent) and Berkley (96 percent), each of which has less than 2 percent black population.

### **School beliefs inaccurate**

The search for better schools for their children is a common cry among people looking for new homes. Matching a common perception, black-majority school districts tended to do poorly in a News analysis of 88 Metro Detroit school districts. But those differences narrow or disappear when the wealth of a community is considered.

\* Southfield's overall school score in the News' 2000-01 school-year analysis was 27th out of 88 school districts. Of those ranked higher, only three -- Auburn Hills, Trenton and Warren -- have lower home values. Southfield's score is comparable to Walled Lake, and Oxford

and Orion townships, all communities with significantly higher home values, and significantly less integrated.

\* Of the seven school districts earning an F on the News' letter-grade scale, four are in communities whose population is less than 10 percent black. The lowest-ranked district was Lincoln Park, a community with a 2-percent black population.

### **Crime fear misleading**

Fear of crime is often cited by whites when choosing not to live in black neighborhoods. According to a Detroit News analysis of 1996 crime statistics, the region's majority-black cities have higher-than-average crime rates. The three communities with the highest overall crime rate, River Rouge, Highland Park and Pontiac, are among the area's top 10 cities with highest black populations.

But when wealth of the community is taken into account, the disparity often decreases or disappears. For example:

\* Southfield's crime rate is similar to the much-whiter Auburn Hills and Lyon Township, and lower than that of Wixom.

\* In 1996, Oak Park (47 percent black) had 148 reported crimes per 1,000 residents; Taylor (8 percent black) had 155 crimes per 1,000 residents.

\* Hamtramck (15 percent black) and Harper Woods (10 percent black) had higher crime rates than Detroit (82 percent black).

### **Similar goals**

A good education for their children is just as important to blacks as to whites. Homeowners of both races want to make money on their homes. So why do black and white home shoppers ask the same questions and come up with different answers? David Harris, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan, believes the answer lies partly in history and partly in culture, and both are related to race.

The Grosse Pointes, for example, may be accepting of blacks today, but "without a PR campaign, how would blacks know?" Harris said. Forty years after a scheme that systematically excluded blacks, the Pointes remain only 1 percent black.

Also, there is a tendency for people of similar backgrounds to stick together. Harris points to university cafeterias, where black and white students often self-segregate. "There's a sense of feeling more comfortable around people they believe have a shared culture and background," he said.

Whether you're black or white, "you want to maximize happiness for you and your family," Harris said. "You want good schools and a nice house, but there's also something to be said for neighbors who you can relate to."

While much of the separation is voluntary, living apart continues to feed distrust and myths, Darden said.

"When one is separated geographically, you have more hostility, more friction," Darden said. Thus, segregation often leads to more segregation in a cycle that can be seen clearly from the corner of

segregation, in a cycle that can be seen clearly from the corner of Inkster and 8 Mile roads, where the southwest corner of Southfield touches the northeast corner of Livonia.

### **A public concern**

Michael and Caroline Mallory, who are African American, moved from Detroit to Southfield five years ago. Caroline Mallory grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood in Detroit and wanted the same experience for her children. Southfield offered nice homes, with the "comfort" of being majority-black. Their neighborhood is 62 percent black.

A few miles away, Janine Houle-Gurka and her family, who are white, built a home in Livonia. For them, it was a move up to a 1,600-square-foot ranch from a cramped home in Dearborn Heights.

They looked at other cities, but "everything was worse than what we had or too expensive," she said. Livonia is 95 percent white.

Darden doesn't blame either family, yet he knows the consequences of thousands of similar innocent decisions every year.

"It matters where people live," Darden said. "It affects quality of life, and affects people's views on things. If two groups from different races live in the same municipality, there's a greater chance that they will share some opinions.

"Stereotypes do not get broken down until you get a different experience," Darden said. "Fear of integration is best broken down by integration."

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