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The Cost of Segregation || Part I: Racial Attitudes

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Race attitudes improve after 9-11

But experts question whether the good feelings will last

By Jodi Upton / *The Detroit News*

Metro Detroiters may be feeling more kindly toward their neighbors of different races after Sept. 11. But some experts say the warm, fuzzy feelings may not last long enough to change the area's high levels of segregation.

Residents say they're less likely to fear discrimination in mixed-race neighborhoods and more likely to have friends of other races, according to two Detroit News/WDIV polls taken in August and in January. The polls were done to examine why Metro Detroit remains the most segregated area in the nation.

But while some attitudes have shifted, attitudes regarding blacks and whites still appear to be intact. For example, only 4 percent said they changed their attitudes about blacks and whites, a number within the margin of error of plus or minus 7 percentage points. The August poll had a margin of error of 4 percentage points.

"It's not something that can be changed overnight," said Joe Darden, urban affairs professor at Michigan State University. "It's so deeply ingrained that the

CyberSurvey

Will segregation end on it's own?

Do you think segregation in Metro Detroit will eventually go away on it's own, without the intervention of government, business or other groups?

yes no

[Check Survey Results](#)

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Is the improvement in black/white relations permanent?

Will the current thawing in black/white relations in Metro Detroit (as measured by a January Detroit News/WDIV poll) likely remain permanent, even though many social scientists say such a scenario would be unprecedented? Why or why not?

yes no

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Segregation in Metro Detroit :

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behavior patterns occur without people even thinking about them. You're dealing with a long-term kind of relationship."

Robert Bauer, a retired post office worker in Eastpointe, agrees that Sept. 11 probably did little to change white-black relations. He says the real fallout is with Arab Americans.

"I think it probably has changed some minds. And negatively. I think the differences are with Arab Americans."

Others see the results as more hopeful, since 19 percent said they had changed their attitude positively about people of another race.

Among the changes since Sept. 11:

* In August, 31 percent of people living in Metro Detroit said they would move if up to half of their neighbors were of another race. Four months after the terrorist attacks, only 16 percent of people said they would move.

* Last week, people reported having less concern about discrimination, crime and schools in mixed-race neighborhoods. For example, in the earlier poll, 37 percent of people said a fear of discrimination would keep them from moving into a mixed-race neighborhood; last week, only 5 percent cited that fear.

* In August, 61 percent of people said they had close friends of another race. In January, that number had increased to 76 percent.

Some say they have seen the signs of thawing relations, but have been disappointed that the post-attack world is not dramatically different.

"I thought a lot of stuff would change after Sept. 11, but I really don't see any changes," said Mary Niedermeyer, 17, a senior at Annapolis High School in Dearborn Heights. "We've tried to unite all races together, but here we are, still apart."

That's not surprising, experts say. Historically, racial attitudes have been resistant to change, and even culturally defining events have little impact, said Tom Smith, director of the General Social Survey, a national survey of public attitudes.

"I know of no evidence in 50 years of following trends, in which any events not (directly) linked to race relations have had an effect," Smith said.

"Black-white feelings are shaped to a strong extent by how people are raised. It's not the kind of thing that an indirect event, even of enormity like this, will change."

And in spite of a slightly warmer atmosphere, Metro Detroit's blacks and whites have not changed their opinions toward governmental policies that might improve the level of integration.

Before Sept. 11, 38 percent of people said they strongly or somewhat supported busing to racially balance schools; after Sept. 11, 39 percent supported busing.

In August, 79 percent of people strongly or somewhat supported enforcing laws that ban discrimination in housing and mortgage lending. In January, 83 percent supported it -- a statistical tie.

But there may still be some hope. The terrorist attacks may have forced people to think more about things such as race, racial profiling and how we live together.

Americus Crawford of Detroit thinks that's true. In stores, in his neighborhood and around town, he notices people smiling a little more, even talking more to each other and ignoring race.

"People are just a little friendlier now. I think black and white relations are improving," said the former Chrysler worker. "But how long will it last? We'll just have to wait and see."

Softening attitudes

Attitudes toward people of another race may have changed since Sept. 11, but people are no more willing to make changes that lead to integration. These responses reflect two polls by Mitchell Research and Communications, Inc. — one an August survey of 650 residents with a margin of error ± 4.4 percent and the other a poll done last week of 206 residents with a margin of error ± 7 percent.

For example:

	IN AUGUST	IN JANUARY
Percent saying they would leave their neighborhood if half or less of those moving into their neighborhood were of another race:	13%	5%
Percent saying their neighbors would leave the neighborhood if half or less of those moving into their neighborhood were of another race:	31%	16%
Percent saying it is very or somewhat likely that fear of discrimination would keep them from moving into a mixed-race neighborhood:	37%	5%
Percent saying it is very or somewhat likely that fear of lower property values would keep them from moving into a mixed-race neighborhood:	45%	23%
Percent saying it is very or somewhat likely that fear of crime would keep them from moving into a mixed-race neighborhood:	32%	21%
Percent saying it is very or somewhat likely that fear of lower quality schools would keep them from moving into a mixed-race neighborhood:	26%	11%
Percent saying they would strongly or somewhat support busing students to racially balance schools:	38%	39%
Percent saying they had close friends of another race:	61%	76%

The Detroit News

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