Hypersegregation label still applies to area suburbs

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A few decades back, comedian Dick Gregory quipped: "In the South, whites don't care how close Negroes get, just as long as they don't get too big. In the North, whites don't care how big Negroes get, just as long as they don't get too close."

New research suggests that zinger still packs some truth - a point Milwaukee helps to illustrate.

A local think tank, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, did to conventional thinking about residential segregation in America what Picasso did to the human form: Rearrange it.

Metro Milwaukee, which tops or almost tops the old segregation charts, sits unobtrusively mid-level in the institute's rendering - a pattern that other Midwestern cities follow. The least segregated in the old charts, Western cities with few black residents, morph into the most segregated in the institute's topsy-turvy work. Meanwhile, Southern cities, hidden in the glow of the West in the standard tables, rise to most integrated in the new creation.

The institute arrays from most integrated to
least not just the 100 biggest metropolitan areas, but also the 50 biggest cities. The normal approach is to focus just on metro areas. Milwaukee the city ranks a not-too-shabby 10th, with more than one in five residents (21.7%) living on blocks at least a fifth black and a fifth white.

But the ranking of cities raises this question: How does suburban Milwaukee compare with its counterparts elsewhere? The UWM report does not broach that issue, prompting me to work out the answer by pursuing the institute's numbers backward with the help of U.S. census data on metropolitan populations.

My focus: The suburban rings around the 50 biggest cities. I wind up with 47 rings. Suburban Colorado Springs falls by the wayside for want of data in the institute's report. And Los Angeles and Long Beach share the same ring, as do Phoenix and Mesa, Ariz.

The findings:

- The Milwaukee suburbs rank a decidedly shabby 42nd out of 47, with just one in 129 residents (0.8%) living on integrated blocks.
- Virginia Beach, the nation's most integrated big city (according to the UWM institute's criteria), also boasts the nation's most integrated suburban ring. Almost two in five suburban residents there (37.7%) live on integrated blocks - nearly the same rate of racial mingling as in city neighborhoods (which boast an integration score of 41.1%).
- Six of the top 10 on the suburban integration chart lie on the other side of the Maxon-Dixon line; two straddle it.
- Besides suburban Virginia Beach, the top five include suburban Washington (integration score of 21.4%), Atlanta (19.5%), Memphis (19.3%) and Baltimore (18.7%).
- The rings with the least amount of black-white integration envelop San Jose, Tucson and Portland, Ore. (all registering 0.2% on the integration scale.) Of course, black people are conspicuous by their scarcity throughout those metro areas.
- Some metropolitan areas sporting proportionately far fewer African-Americans than does Milwaukee - Seattle, El Paso and San Diego, for example - nonetheless feature a higher rate of mixing of blacks and whites in the suburbs than does Beer Town.

The conclusion: Clearly, the city has done the heavy lifting in moving greater Milwaukee from the third most segregated among the 100 biggest metro areas, as measured traditionally, to the 43rd most integrated, as measured by the UWM institute. The suburbs have been acting as a drag in this effort.

Thus, the institute's data do leave intact some old notions.
numbers jibe with long-standing census-based reports that in no other metropolitan area do so proportionately few African-Americans live in the suburbs as in Milwaukee. (Apologists attribute this phenomenon to late annexation by the city - a theory that depends on dubious assumptions, including the unlikely scenario that, were the far northwest side a suburb, African-Americans could have moved there in the same numbers as they actually did.)

More so than most of its counterparts around the nation, Milwaukee's suburban ring is acting as if it doesn't want black people to get too close.

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