All is not well when it comes to diversity here

By WILLIAM R. TISDALE

Last Updated: Jan. 18, 2003

In a recent series of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel articles, it was reported that Milwaukee, long known for its extreme segregation, has suddenly become a bastion for racial integration in the United States.

The article suggests that we, now based on a different type of ranking system, can breathe a sigh of collective relief regarding the relative level of segregation in our metropolitan area.

While we can appreciate the efforts of researchers to improve the city's image, we must take issue with some of the study's assumptions.

One of the assumptions that may be most deeply flawed is that while there may be some progress in housing patterns within the boundaries of the city of Milwaukee, this hardly denotes integration of the entire metropolitan Milwaukee area.

Regardless of where metropolitan Milwaukee ranks in integration ratings, the fact remains that more than half of all African-Americans in the city of Milwaukee reside on blocks that are more than 80% black. On a broader scope, in the four-county metropolitan area, only 1.5% of Milwaukee's suburban population is African-American.
These numbers hardly depict an "integrated" community. Rather, they describe an area in which people are highly separated and isolated from persons of races other than their own.

This level of segregation has widespread social consequences. For instance, Milwaukee has the dubious distinction of having the highest mortgage loan disparity rate between African-Americans and whites; the largest income gap between black and white households; and the largest disparity between black and white high school graduation rates.

Additionally, access to economic opportunities is severely limited by such entrenched segregation. As job growth in suburban communities expands, inner city residents have limited access to such employment.

Segregation is not an accident. It is the result of discriminatory actions and policies that have the effect of limiting residential choice for people of color.

While some of these actions are historical, contemporary practices in suburban communities also continue to play a major role. Some of these include exclusionary policies that require minimum home and lot sizes and rejection of the construction of low- and moderate-income family housing. These practices serve to exclude minority families from housing opportunities in those segregated communities.

The authors of the recently reported study, in fact, suggested the need for remedial efforts to combat housing discrimination and create affordable housing opportunities, particularly for low- and moderate-income families interested in moving into suburban areas. Unfortunately, this portion of the study was not highlighted in the recent Journal Sentinel series.

This series may leave a reader with the impression that all is well, and we no longer need to be concerned about such segregation in our communities.

However, if we are to truly celebrate a diverse and integrated city, it is imperative that we redirect our focus from where Milwaukee ranks nationally, to how we can overcome Milwaukee's historically segregated housing patterns.

By being complacent, we only further hinder life opportunities for residents of our communities.

William R. Tisdale is president and chief executive officer of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Fair Housing Council.