Gurda: Most segregated metro area? It's just not that simple

John Gurda Published 10:25 a.m. CT Feb. 3, 2017 | Updated 6:24 p.m. CT Feb. 3, 2017

Let me step directly into the minefield of race by saying that I'm tired of hearing about Milwaukee's status as the most segregated community in America.


(Photo: Journal Sentinel files)

Is there anything more difficult to write about than race? Is there any subject that carries such an emotional charge, such potential to confuse, enrage and divide? Race is, after all, with the possible exception of gender, the first thing we notice about each other, and every encounter triggers an unconscious tangle of inherited attitudes, ancient tensions and unresolved questions.

Let me step directly into the minefield of race by saying that I'm tired of hearing about Milwaukee's status as the most segregated community in America. Segregation is often the first thing mentioned in national news stories and the first problem identified by local activists. It's as if we all had a big scarlet letter "S" on our chests, wearing it as a badge of shame for all the world to see. Anyone who hasn't been to another Northern city — almost any other Northern city — might think that Milwaukee was the capital of American *apartheid*, an oppressive throwback to the Jim Crow South.

It's nothing of the kind, but let me be clear: I'm not giving my hometown a pass. I don't write from wounded pride or naivete about the racism in our midst. Milwaukee's problems are glaringly obvious, but they are problems we share with the rest of the urban North, aggravated by some unique historical and geographic circumstances. I object to the "most segregated" tag because it reflects an incomplete, often knee-jerk understanding of race in Milwaukee, and because it's both demoralizing and unproductive.

First, let's look at the numbers. One widely used measure of segregation is the index of dissimilarity, which calculates how many blacks would have to move to achieve an even distribution across a given metropolitan area. In 2014, the most recent census sample year available, Milwaukee scored highest, after finishing second to Detroit in 2010. Another measure, the isolation index, calculates the proportion of a metro area's African-Americans who live in census tracts that are at least 80% black. Milwaukee ranked eleventh in 2014, down from fifth in 2010.

Whether you use dissimilarity or isolation as your yardstick, Milwaukee is always in the same cluster of Northern cities that includes Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Buffalo and Philadelphia. The numbers confirm

what common sense and personal experience suggest. The north side of Milwaukee is not appreciably different from the south side of Chicago, the east side of Cleveland, or the heart of Detroit, all of which I've seen firsthand. The African-American ghetto has become an American landscape type, virtually interchangeable from one city to the next.

Milwaukee is hardly unique, and yet there are specific conditions that have shaped the African-American experience here. The first reflects the city's internal geography. For most of our existence, the north and south sides have been monolithic districts, ethnic and racial strongholds where outsiders knew within a minute or two that they didn't belong there. For generations, the north side was German, the south side was Polish, and they were practically two different countries, with different inscriptions above the church doors, different sweets on the bakery shelves and different languages heard in the saloons. More than a century later, after one of the least-studied transformations in Milwaukee's history, the same districts are overwhelmingly African-American and Latino. The residents are completely different, but the underlying pattern is identical.

'Us vs. Them'

I recently read an essay by a local writer who claimed that she could tell a Milwaukeean's cultural background by his or her address. She made that observation as an indictment, one more evidence of the city's hypersegregation. The simple fact is that she could have done the same thing with equal confidence 125 years ago.

The strength of Milwaukee's immigrant communities had another impact on local race relations. Any group with a highly developed sense of "us" will have an equally strong conception of "them," and African-Americans represented otherness of a previously unknown order. When blacks expanded into the north side after World War II, they entered a heavily German enclave whose members yielded ground slowly and resentfully. Milwaukee was spared the savage violence that left 38 people dead in a 1919 Chicago race riot, but the welcome mat was conspicuously absent. White resistance, reinforced by restrictive housing covenants and racist lending practices, created a color line that changed slowly and painfully.

A third historical/geographic factor far outweighed the first two, and that was Milwaukee's place in the region. During the first phase of the Great Migration, from 1915 to 1930, hundreds of thousands of black sharecroppers traded the fields of the rural South for the factories of the urban North, fleeing the tyranny of Jim Crow laws and seeking "the warmth of other suns," a Richard Wright line that also is the title of an excellent recent study of the movement. Like a gigantic sponge, Chicago absorbed the lion's share of migrants coming to the upper Midwest. Milwaukee, lying squarely in the larger city's shadow, attracted relatively few newcomers.

The numbers are telling: in 1920, African-Americans made up over 4% of Chicago's population and only 0.5% of Milwaukee's, an eightfold difference. In 1950, even after the full-employment years of World War II, the contrast was nearly as stark: blacks made up 14% of the Windy City's population and just 3.4% of the Cream City's. Ranked by its proportion of African-Americans, Milwaukee was typically dead-last among the nation's largest cities until 1970.

Why is that important? Because Milwaukee's black community reached critical mass a full generation later than its peers elsewhere in the North. That's one less generation to put down roots, develop supportive institutions and grow a middle class. The fact that Milwaukee's black residents were, on

average, more than four years younger than their Chicago counterparts was another limiting factor; they simply had less experience than their fellow Southerners in the migrant stream.

The jobs implosion

It was in 1970, less than 50 years ago, that the local African-American population finally broke into the double digits, making up 15% of the city's residents. Despite stubborn resistance on multiple fronts, the new arrivals did make headway. Slowly at first, African-Americans climbed into Milwaukee's blue-collar aristocracy, earning union wages in a union town at companies such as Allis-Chalmers and A.O. Smith. By 1980, in fact, nearly 50% of the city's employed black males worked in manufacturing, compared with 41% of all male workers. At long last, the migrants and their children could say that they were getting somewhere.

No sooner had African-American workers started to climb the ladder into the middle class than it was rudely yanked out from under them. Milwaukee lost a quarter of its manufacturing jobs between 1979 and 1983, and the losses kept coming. Deindustrialization claimed giants such as Allis-Chalmers and cut payrolls at virtually every other plant. "Last hired, first fired" still applied, and in 1986 Milwaukee's black unemployment rate approached 26%, nearly three times the metro average. Between 1980 and 1990 — a decade of recovery for the rest of the economy — the proportion of the city's African-Americans living in poverty soared from 28.4% to 41.9%.

It doesn't take a doctorate in sociology to connect the dots. The great mass of Milwaukee's African-Americans began young, arrived late and had only a decade or two to establish themselves before the roof caved in. They have, in effect, been fighting with one hand tied behind their backs ever since they got here.

One result is a high level of segregation. Racist practices of the past had an obvious geographic impact, but the legal barriers to African-American mobility are down. What has kept the north side ghetto intact, in addition to the age-old human instinct to live among those who look like us, is an economy first flattened and then frozen in place.

How do I know? Consider Holton St., the border between Riverwest on the east and Harambee on the west. Holton is as stark a racial dividing line as exists in Milwaukee: 20% black on the east side and 74% on the west. The gap exists despite the fact that Riverwest is without doubt the most open, tolerant neighborhood in the city today, a community that embraces its diversity and is ready for more.

Why, then, such a vivid color line? Two numbers suggest an answer. In 2015, Riverwest's median housing value was 60% higher than Harambee's, and Harambee's median household income was 40% lower than Riverwest's. That mismatch, in an otherwise receptive area, is revealing. Milwaukee's hypersegregation is rooted in a fundamental lack of buying power. For African-American households who can't afford even very affordable Riverwest, Brookfield and Mequon might as well be the moon. That reality should be kept in mind whenever the topic of segregation comes up.

The impact of race

If the root problem is economic — class trumping race — does that mean that Milwaukee, contrary to stereotype, is an oasis of racial enlightenment? Hardly. It was race, first of all, that produced those class

divisions, going back to the dark days of slavery, and the split has been aggravated by the specific local conditions described here.

And so we find ourselves living in a community, like many others in America, where most blacks and most whites navigate the world in cultural bubbles, relying on media reports and tired stereotypes for their views of each other. I know white suburbanites who refuse to drive through any part of the north side for fear of being robbed, raped and beaten — on the same streets I've biked and walked for years without serious incident.

But the ignorance is mutual. I met an African-American woman this fall with a novel explanation for the loss of factory jobs that has inflicted such damage on her community. White manufacturers, she insisted, were so alarmed by the city's growing black population that they closed their factories in a concerted effort to shut down African-American migration and deny the newcomers a shot at the mayor's office. Paranoia and blind suspicion flourish on both sides of the color line.

Milwaukee, it seems to me, faces two problems today, related but different. The first is economic. It's been nearly 30 years since Allis-Chalmers went bankrupt. Despite good intentions and some promising initiatives, nothing of serious consequence has changed in the north side's economy since then, and no one, really, has taken ownership of the issue. What the inner city needs is jobs, jobs and more jobs — and the educational and social support necessary to sustain them. Until African-Americans have the means to improve their own neighborhoods or move to better ones, any discussion of ending segregation is purely academic.

The second, quite separate, task we face is interpersonal. All across America and more especially in cities such as Milwaukee, it takes real effort to cross the color line; our accustomed circles are either black or white but rarely both. Simplistic labels such as "most segregated" aren't helpful. They only aggravate the problem, making us look down at our shoes rather than at solutions.

Our common goal should be to overcome our mutual ignorance. If we remain open to every opportunity to learn each other's stories, if we resist the temptation to point fingers, if we speak with honesty and leave room for nuance, Milwaukeeans, one by one, can build a platform for progress on both sides of the racial divide. Our future, after all, is not a simple matter of black or white. Building it will require the best efforts of all of us, working together.

John Gurda, a Milwaukee historian, writes for the Crossroads section on the first Sunday of each month (www.johngurda.com). *https://www.jsonline.com/story/opinion/crossroads/2017/02/03/gurda-segregated-metro-area-just-simple/97444218/*