



Census study: Racial segregation persists in Muskegon-Norton Shores metro area

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By **Brian McVicar** | **The Muskegon Chronicle**

MUSKEGON — Diversity is hard to come by in Elisia Sparkman's neighborhood.

With a population that's roughly 90 percent African American, her one-story rental home on the 2000 block of Wood Street in Muskegon Heights is among the most racially segregated areas in the county, according to census data.

But the divide isn't necessarily motivated by skin color, said Sparkman, 56, an African American who gets by on social security disability. Income, emotional ties to one's neighborhood, lack of opportunity to go elsewhere — all play a role in the racial makeup of Muskegon County's neighborhoods, she said.

“Our generation, when we stay still, it's because we have an investment in the property,” said Sparkman, who lives at the Wood Street home with her husband, Selvy. “It's not because it's a black neighborhood, it's not because it's a white neighborhood.”

Segregation can be seen across Muskegon County.

An analysis of census data by Brown University found the Muskegon-Norton Shores Metropolitan Statistical Area — equivalent to Muskegon County — is the sixth most segregated metropolitan statistical area in the country.

It's a lack of integration on par with some of the largest urban areas in the country, including Milwaukee, New York, Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland, according to the analysis by John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown and director of the university's US2010 census project.

Segregation in Michigan Metropolitan Statistical Areas				
City	1980	1990	2000	2010
Muskegon-Norton Shores	74.1	76.8	76.4	71.2
Grand Rapids-Wyoming	76.0	72.7	64.5	61.4
Kalamazoo-Portage	55.9	53.2	48.6	46.1
Jackson	74	69.8	64.9	57.4
Flint	84.5	81.2	76.6	67.3
Saginaw-Saginaw Township North	83.7	82.7	72.2	64.9
Lansing-East Lansing	56.6	56.7	55.4	52.6

— Source: Brown University US2010 census project. A score of zero would be completely integrated and 100 would be completely segregated.

“It's very high, and it's just not changing,” Logan said of segregation in the Muskegon area over the past 30 years. “There's enough other things changing in the world that you would have thought there would be some slow place of incorporation of African-Americans into a wider range of neighborhoods.”

Despite the divide, slightly more whites and African Americans live in the same neighborhood than a decade ago, Logan's numbers show.

On a scale of zero to 100, with zero being completely integrated and 100 being completely segregated, Muskegon scored a 71.2 in 2010, according to the Brown University study. That's down from 76.4 in 2000 and 76.8 in 1990.

The change is visible to the Rev. Charles Poole, senior pastor at Bethesda Baptist Church on Getty Street.

“Having been here for a long, long, long time, I would have to begin by saying, in general, we've made progress,” Poole said. “We've still got a long way to go. I came here in 1963, and of course, things were much, much, much different than they are today.”

In four Muskegon County census tracts, the percentage of African Americans and white residents is almost evenly split. About 83 percent of the county's 24,599 African American, non-Hispanic residents live in about one-quarter of the county's 42 census tracts.

Among the tracts where there's an even split, two are near Muskegon's Nelson neighborhood. Bordered by Peck Street to the east, one tract stretches as far south as Keating Avenue and comes within five or so blocks of Apple Avenue to the north.

Diversity is part of what Elaine Klemm cherishes about life in the Nelson neighborhood.

She's lived there for about 16 years, and she says neighbors, both black and white, occasionally gather for block parties when the weather is warm. It was a great environment to raise her four biracial adopted children.

“You can get different ideas from different people; you learn about different cultures,” said Klemm, a preschool teacher for Muskegon Public Schools who is white. “It's just wonderful to have different people and different opinions.”

Kurt Metzger, a demographic expert and director of Data Driven Detroit, said Muskegon is moving in the right direction.

Although the Muskegon-Norton Shores Metropolitan Statistical Area is only slightly less segregated than it was in 1980, it's noticeably less segregated than it was in 1990 and 2000, Metzger said. In 2000, the area had a segregation score of 76.4 and in 2010 it was 71.2, a five-point drop

While the decline isn't as large as that of some communities — such as Detroit, which fell by about 10 points from 2000 to 2010 — a five-percent drop still matters, he said.

“I think it's fairly significant,” Metzger said. “I think there's a real point to be made that diversity is increasing.”

To Larry Lindquist, who chairs the board of directors of the Muskegon-based Institute for Healing Racism, the decline in segregation is positive, but more needs to be done to bridge the racial divide.

“Once you have a dialogue of people of all races, there is an openness, a greater trust that develops, and we would like that trust and that openness to be part of the entire community so we aren't this segregated,” said Lindquist, a retired Montague Area Public Schools administrator.

In Muskegon County, there are 24,599 African-American, non-Hispanic residents, according to census data. That's 14 percent of the county's 172,188 residents. Per-capita income among the

county's African-American population is \$11,761, compared with \$22,140 for whites, according to census data.

Segregation can also be seen in predominantly white areas. About half of Muskegon County's census tracts have an African American population of 2 percent or less. In eight tracts, African Americans comprise less than 1 percent of the population. That includes the area near Sullivan Township and Ravenna.

Logan, the Brown University professor, agrees that Muskegon is more racially integrated now than 20 years ago. But he says the community hasn't come particularly far when compared with its segregation level in 1980. The metropolitan statistical area scored a 74.1 in 1980 and a 71.2 in 2010.

“A 5-point drop, if that were the only thing I saw here I would probably say there's some decline,” Logan said of the improved score from 2000 to 2010. “But when I look back to 1980 and it was 74, I'm more likely to say 'no, this isn't a trend, this is just a little up and a little down.”

On a national level, segregation peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, and declined at a slow pace through the 1980s and 1990s, according to Logan's study. A steady but slow decline continued from 2000 to 2010.

In large metropolitan areas, the typical white resident lives in a neighborhood that is 75 percent white, 8 percent African-American, 11 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian, the study said. In the 1980s, a white resident's neighborhood was typically 88 percent white.

On the other hand, the typical African-American lives in a neighborhood that is 45 percent African-American, 35 percent white, 15 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent Asian, the study said.

Logan said Muskegon has a lot of work to do if it wants to see a noteworthy drop in segregation.

“Muskegon stands out not so much for where it started in 1980 but for the fact that it hasn't changed much,” he said. “Most of the nation is changing.”

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