The News Journal

(Wilmington, Del.)

Despite diversity, a division lingers

Written by **MIKE CHALMERS**

11:36 PM, May. 29, 2011|

In her mind, LaQuita Hamilton sees a map of Harrison Street in Wilmington that's segmented by skin color.

North of Ninth Street is the white neighborhood, she said. South of Ninth to about Sixth Street, where Hamilton lives, most residents are black, with a few whites and Hispanics mixed in. Then it's Hispanics below Sixth, then back to blacks at Lancaster Avenue.

"Within six blocks, it's like three different neighborhoods," said Hamilton, who is black. "It's crazy. We shouldn't feel like we have to segregate ourselves."

Despite decades of increasing diversity, most of Wilmington continues to look like Harrison Street: clearly divided into racial and ethnic communities. Integration has been slow to take hold in a city with a long history of racial change and strife, an analysis of last year's census data shows.

Blacks, Asians, Hispanics and other minorities now make up a third of Delaware's population, and as a group, minorities are spread fairly evenly through the state of 897,934. But pockets of those groups remain common.

Some minority groups -- Hispanics in New Castle County or Asians statewide, for example -- have become even more segregated from whites as immigrants settle in familiar enclaves.

Experts say segregation is a remnant of a history of legal discrimination involving "separate but equal" schools and other public accommodations and "restrictive covenants" that barred homeowners and landlords from selling or renting to minorities. It persists because of racial discrimination, they say, and contributes to a variety of social problems.

"It's very harmful to people stuck in inner-city neighborhoods," said Leland Ware, a University of Delaware urban affairs professor.

"The schools are bad, crime is high," he said. "They're isolated and don't have contact with middle- and upper-income blacks. They're worse off than their grandparents were because they're so isolated."

There has been progress.

Kent County saw segregation increase in the 1990s but reversed that trend in the 2000s. And as Wilmington neighborhoods are redeveloped and new suburban communities are built throughout the state -- without predominantly white or black reputations -- racial integration becomes more likely, experts said.

Some of the most diverse and integrated neighborhoods are along U.S. 13 and 40 from Wilmington to Bear. Shazia H. Khan, a native of Pakistan, sees that integration both as a resident of Colonial Village and as a clerk at the Moores Lane Super Fuel.

"All the people are good," said Khan. "It's a good mix."

Delaware's slow pace of integration is common across the nation, said John Logan, a sociology professor at Brown University in Providence, R.I.

Logan said researchers had expected to see significant improvement in the latest census numbers because of growth in the black middle class and greater racial tolerance.

But while blacks are moving out of cities and into suburbs, whites also are moving -- to more affluent suburbs.

"The neighborhoods that blacks are moving into, whites are moving out of," Logan said. "That's why we don't see bigger changes."

Kent most integrated

Social scientists measure segregation by looking at how evenly two groups are spread across neighborhoods. They calculate an index that ranges from zero, meaning the groups are distributed evenly, to 100, meaning they live in completely separate neighborhoods.

Over the past few decades, Delaware has seen its overall index, comparing non-Hispanic whites and minorities, drop slowly, from 48.1 in 1990 to 40.5 in 2010, The News Journal found using census figures.

Kent County, with an index of 28.6 in 2010, is the most integrated county in the state. Sussex County and New Castle County, excluding Wilmington, are equally integrated, each with an index of 37.2.

Some segregation is self-imposed, such as when Hispanic or Asian immigrants choose to live near other immigrants who speak their language and share their culture.

"In many respects, we celebrate communities that have distinctive characteristics," said Steven

Peuquet, director of UD's Center for Community Research and Service. "I'm a fan of Italian food, and I wouldn't hesitate to find the Little Italy of any city I visit."

White-Asian segregation increased in Delaware, from 38.7 in 1990 to 42.5 in 2010, because the Asian population grew significantly in New Castle County but little elsewhere. Almost 80 percent of the state's Asians live in New Castle County.

In New Castle County outside Wilmington, the white-Hispanic index increased steadily from 30 in 1990 to 40.7 in 2000 and 42.8 in 2010.

One of the state's Hispanic concentrations is in Elsmere, where the population doubled over the past decade. Hispanics now make up almost a quarter of the town's population of 6,100.

Leslie Basillio, 18, works in an Elsmere cellphone store that has a sign in the window that says "Si habla Espanol." Basillio, a Delaware native with Mexican roots, said many of her customers speak only Spanish.

City's race issues

Wilmington's segregation index is just below 60, putting it on the edge of what social scientists would call heavily segregated.

The city has struggled with race issues for decades.

After race riots sparked by Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, the governor deployed the National Guard in Wilmington for more than nine months. About 30 years ago, the city's schools were divided among four districts after a federal court ordered them to desegregate, and city students were bused to suburban schools.

City Councilwoman Hanifa Shabazz said the court order actually contributed to the city's problems because residents lost pride and identity with their neighborhoods and schools.

"It leads to adults saying, 'You're over there, and I'm over here, and what happens in your backyard doesn't affect what happens in my backyard,' " Shabazz said.

Overall, the city is 57 percent black, 28 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic and 3 percent other races, making it one of the most diverse places in Delaware.

The average black resident lives in a neighborhood that's 71 percent black. The average white lives in a neighborhood that's 57 percent white, and the average Hispanic lives in a neighborhood that's 26 percent Hispanic.

One of the city's dividing lines falls along Spruce and Church streets south of the Christina River.

On the west side, where developers have built high-priced town houses and condos at Christina Landing, 62 percent of the residents are white. On the east side of those streets -- in Southbridge -- 98 percent are minority.

In Southbridge, Jonathan Wilson Jr.'s barbershop attracts mostly black customers. One of them said Southbridge residents believe they can't walk around Christina Landing without raising suspicions.

"It's insulting," Wilson said. But "it's something you get used to as an African-American."

Discrimination's role

Most segregation persists because of discrimination, experts said.

Real estate agents -- consciously or not -- may steer people to certain neighborhoods, which is illegal, Ware said. "The agent is looking to make the sale as quickly as possible, so they size up the prospect and figure that a white person won't want to buy in a black neighborhood," he said.

Logan said "white flight" -- the tendency of whites to move out of minority neighborhoods -- still contributes to segregation, despite decades of civil rights gains and attitude shifts.

Studies show whites will accept black neighbors until there are "too many" of them, Ware said. Social scientists say that tipping point is around 20 percent.

"The United States hasn't gotten over the issues of race, and one of the ways it shows up is in people's attitude toward staying in a neighborhood when its racial makeup changes," Logan said. "It doesn't mean everybody has that feeling, but they make a difference in the overall numbers."

Also, the least expensive homes and apartments are usually in minority communities, so poverty reinforces segregation, he said.

Logan said personal finances play surprisingly little role in segregation patterns. Black families earning more than $75,000 a year live in neighborhoods with roughly the same racial makeup of those earning less than $40,000 a year, he said.

"The more important factors are the history of neighborhoods and how receptive they've been to increasing diversity in the population," Logan said.

That's why new neighborhoods are more integrated than old ones, he said: The new ones haven't established reputations yet.

Perceptions of race are closely related to ideas about conflict and crime.

"There's a perception that equates black presence with crime," Ware said. "It may not be a conscious thing."

Some of that perception is rooted in reality, Logan said. Segregation contributes to a higher crime rate, a sensitive notion that has been backed up by research, he said.

Part of the reason is that segregated residents lack the political clout and community organization to advocate for change.

"As long as the crime is concentrated in a particular part of a region, it's considered to be under control," Logan said.

Also, social ills -- poverty, broken families, poor health and low education levels -- become concentrated in segregated neighborhoods, he said.

"Whiteness itself translates into a kind of neighborhood," Logan said. "Defeating residential segregation is the only way we can defeat these disparities in people's lives."

Diversity embraced

Those who live in the middle-class neighborhoods along U.S. 13 and 40 say they enjoy the diversity and integration around them.

When Pat Jones moved with her husband to Gainor Road about 30 years ago, most of their neighbors were white. As the older residents have died or moved out, they've been replaced by minority owners.

"It's very diverse," said Jones, who is white. "We have whites, blacks, Mexicans, Dominicans. It's a good neighborhood."

Bob Lewis moved to Valley Forge Road 27 years ago, when he was among the neighborhood's 30 percent black residents. Lewis said he felt welcomed there and has watched the black population grow to about 50 percent.

He stood in front of his house recently and counted his neighbors' homes: black, white, black, white, black, black, black, Asian, white, black.

Cleveland Roberts, 27, lives in Pleasantville, a small, diverse neighborhood near the New Castle Airport. He said most residents like the quieter suburban lifestyle of the area near New Castle.

"People are tired of the hustle and bustle of the urban environment," Roberts said. "That's what makes it a great place to live."

Tiffany Mitchell lives in Coachman's Manor and stopped at the nearby Moores Lane Super Fuel after work the other day.

Neighbors of all colors walked in and out of the store, too.

"A lot of people think that if you put a lot of cultures together, you'll have problems," Mitchell said. "All the kids play together -- Spanish, white, black. Everybody seems to get along pretty good."

MEASURING DELAWARE SEGREGATION

Social scientists measure segregation using an index that describes how evenly two groups are spread across neighborhoods. The lowest possible value is zero, which means the percentage of each group in every neighborhood is the same as their overall percentage in the city, county or state. The highest value of 100 indicates that the two groups live in completely different neighborhoods.
Scientists consider a place with an index of 30 or less to be well integrated; an index of 60 or greater is considered highly segregated.

RACIAL SEGREGATION

Delaware 1990 2000 2010
Whites/Blacks 54.0 51.4 48.8
Whites/Hispanics 43.4 45.6 43.5
Whites/Asians 38.7 40.0 42.5
Whites/all minorities
Wilmington 62.7 59.5 55.8
New Castle County, 37.5 38.4 37.2
excluding Wilmington
Kent County 32.5 34.4 28.6
Sussex County 38.7 39.4 37.2
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, The News Journal
research