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Susan Welch, Lee Sigelman, Timothy Bledsoe and Michael Combs
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RACE AND PLACE

A striking but little recognized change in race relations during the past two decades has been the declining level of racial segregation in most of America's major metropolitan areas. Slowly, more areas of American cities are beginning to have both black and white residents. An integral component of this decline in residential segregation has been the large-scale but under-publicized movement of blacks to the suburbs.

This book focuses on the impact of these changes on the attitudes and behavior of African Americans and whites. Will whites' attitudes about blacks and blacks' attitudes about whites change if they are living in integrated neighborhoods rather than apart from one another? Are black suburbanites more likely to share the views of their fellow white suburbanites or of their fellow African Americans in the central city? Will residential integration and new patterns of race in the suburbs break down divisions between blacks and whites in their views of local public services? These are the central questions of this book.

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RACE AND PLACE

Race Relations in an American City

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, VIC 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

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First published 2001

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface Sabon 10/12 pt. *System* QuarkXPress™ [HT]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Race and place: race relations in an American city/Susan Welch … [et al.].
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in political psychology and public opinion)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-521-79215-0 – ISBN 0-521-79655-5 (pbk.)
1. Detroit Region (Mich.) – Race relations. 2. African Americans – Michigan – Detroit Region – Attitudes. 3. Whites – Michigan – Detroit Region – Attitudes. 4. African Americans – Housing – Michigan – Detroit Region. 5. Whites – Housing – Michigan – Detroit Region. 6. Discrimination in housing – Michigan – Detroit Region – History – 20th century. 7. Detroit Region (Mich.) – Social conditions – 20th century. 8. Suburban life – Michigan – Detroit Region – History – 20th century.
I. Welch, Susan. II. Series.

F574.D49 A27 2001
305.8'009774'34–dc21 2001025035

ISBN 0 521 79215 0 hardback
ISBN 0 521 79655 5 paperback

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Preface

In 2000, the *New York Times* published a major series based on an investigation of how whites and blacks in America communicate with each other.[1] Featuring individuals as diverse as army drill sergeants, rising Internet entrepreneurs, young Cuban immigrants, elected officials, slaughterhouse workers, antebellum plantation owners, Harlem police officers, and suburban teenagers, the *Times* writers told a story of both progress and setbacks in race relations. According to this series, whites and African Americans are coming into contact with each other with a frequency unprecedented in the twentieth century and in relationships unprecedented in any time in the nation's history. However, for every newly opened line of communication, new misunderstandings arise. For every attempt to understand one another's perspectives, an inclination to blame interpersonal misunderstandings on race develops. The *Times*'s stories are fascinating case studies, which do much to capture the progress, difficulties, and continuing ambiguities of American race relations at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Many of the *Times*'s stories reflect well-known features of American race relations: the increasingly racially mixed work forces, the difficulties of real integration in supposedly integrated schools, and the struggles and successes of African American candidates for public office. But the stories do not reveal much about a less well known feature of race relations: the declining levels of racial segregation in most of America's major metropolitan areas. To be sure, the pace of this change has been slow and uneven, but the 1990s saw a reversal in the decades-long trend of increasing residential segregation. One indicator of this is a dissimilarity index, a measure indicating the proportion of the population that would have to change locations in order for each neighborhood to reflect the overall racial composition of the city (Massey and Denton,

1 These stories ran periodically throughout June and July 2000.

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1987; Massey, 2000; see also Sorenson, Taeuber, and Hollingsworth, 1975). With 100 being the highest level of segregation, that index, applied to major metropolitan areas, decreased from 75 in 1970 to 67 in 1990.[2] Slowly, more areas of American cities are beginning to have both black and white residents. Sometimes the residential integration is temporary, as when a neighborhood turns from all white to all black, but other times the mixed-race character of a neighborhood is more permanent.

An integral component of this decline in residential segregation has been the large-scale but underpublicized movement of blacks to the suburbs. This movement has not always been to middle-class or upper middle class suburbs of the sort that grew out of the post–World War II flight of whites from the city. Nonetheless, the exodus of blacks from central cities to suburbs also has a potential for changing the dynamics of race relations in America's metropolitan areas.

This book focuses on the impact of these changes on the attitudes and behavior of African Americans and whites. Will whites' attitudes about blacks and blacks' attitudes toward whites change if they are living in integrated neighborhoods rather than apart from one another? Are black suburbanites more likely to share the views of their fellow white suburbanites or of their fellow African Americans in the central city? Will residential integration and new patterns of race in the suburbs break down divisions between blacks and whites in their views of local public services? These are the central questions of this book.

These questions are important because residential patterns undergird much that is negative about American race relations. From cradle to grave, in hospitals, day care establishments, schools, churches, and funeral parlors, much of America is still largely segregated. Housing patterns shape this segregation.

These questions are interesting, because although social scientists have long been concerned about how residential contexts shape individual behavior, their insights have not been applied very often to questions of race.[3] Thus, we apply understandings gained in other research about the influence of context to the case of race relations in the central city and suburbs. Our guiding principle is that as the racial composition of neigh-

2 A second measure of segregation, the *isolation scale,* declined slightly during this time, from 69 to 65. It ranges from 1, designating the lowest possible level of black isolation, to 100, the point at which every black would reside in a neighborhood composed solely of other blacks.

3 There is certainly significant work on how larger racial contexts, such as congressional districts, shape electoral behavior. Although there is little on neighborhood influences, see Huckfeldt (1986), Orbell and Sherrill (1969), Sears and Kinder (1970), Taylor (1998), and Wilson (1971).

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borhoods changes, it becomes more and more important to understand what this change might bode for racial attitudes.

Why might we expect changing racial patterns of neighborhood residence to shape racial attitudes and behavior? Attitudes are shaped not only by personal characteristics such as religion, gender, and education, but also by context (see Eulau, 1996, for a general treatment of different levels of analysis). Neighborhoods are an important context. They provide opportunities for forming friendships and close relationships (Huckfeldt, 1986). They also provide settings for more casual interactions, which over time have the potential to influence attitudes in either a positive or conflictual direction (Sprague, 1982). Neighborhoods can be strikingly different: Some subject residents to an existence in which violent crime is an ever-present threat, but others allow residents to enjoy a life in which street crime is something they only read about in the newspaper; in some neighborhoods, schools provide students with excellent educational opportunities, whereas in others the schools are dilapidated and the teachers dispirited. Neighborhoods also provide a spatial focus for structured and unstructured interactions, whether they be school board meetings, sporting events, or casual, spur-of-the-moment conversations on the sidewalk.

We believe that the neighborhood racial context is very important in understanding racial attitudes. We also believe that the difference between living in the suburbs and living in the central city has the potential to affect attitudes. The politics of suburbia are relatively unexplored (see Wood, 1959, for a classic study) and the racial politics of suburbia are almost completely uninvestigated. But no matter how bland the politics of suburbia are, suburbs have their own political structures and organizational and social life. They provide different settings for contact than do central cities. The quality and scope of the public services and the quality of life may also differ dramatically from those found in the central city. All those factors can differentiate the personal and political views of urbanites and suburbanites.

How might these contexts mold attitudes? To date, social scientists have provided few and conflicting answers to these questions. Neighborhoods and city boundaries offer opportunities for both informal social contact and more formal interaction for individuals as members of clubs, churches, schools, and political entities. Prior research, much of which is reviewed herein, indicates that when people of different races have frequent contact with one another, their hostile feelings toward the members of another race often, but not always, tend to decrease. Increasing neighborhood integration offers the potential for more of these contacts. Prior research also indicates, however, that in large geographical units such as counties or metropolitan areas, whites' hostility toward African

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Americans is greater where there are more African Americans. Unfortunately, largely ignored in both streams of research have been neighborhood-based relationships, the core of person-to-person interracial contact and the main building block of spatially defined interaction patterns.

This book examines race relations in the city of Detroit and the surrounding metropolitan region, an area often studied by scholars of racial attitudes. The opportunity to study race in the Detroit area offered us the ability not only to examine the effects of residential context on the racial attitudes of both blacks and whites in the early 1990s, when we began this study, but also to compare racial attitudes in the 1990s with those at the time of civil unrest in Detroit a quarter of a century earlier. Our study is nearly unique in its inclusion of black suburbanites as a significant focus of attention and in its comparison of black suburbanites with both their African American central city counterparts and their white suburban counterparts.

Writing about race in America is a difficult task. Emotion can override rationality, and subtlety can lose to simplification. Our own beliefs are that, although the United States has made great progress in moving toward racial equality compared with earlier generations, there is still a very long way to travel. Racism, even in its crudest forms, is not just a historical event but is alive today in some parts of society and perhaps at some times in all parts of society. At the same time, we do not agree with the view that race relations are worse at the beginning of the new century than they were decades ago. Too often, the often harsh realities of race relations at the beginning of the twenty-first century are compared with a sanitized view of the past. Our hope is that this book, by shedding light on conditions that appear to enhance positive attitudes and interactions, will illuminate both areas of progress and areas of stagnation. In all cases, there is much to be done in moving America toward a society where equality of opportunity is an apt description of reality.

This book is the result of a decade of effort. The focus of our analysis is a 1992 survey conducted in metropolitan Detroit. We thank the National Science Foundation for its support for this survey and the Wayne State Center for Urban Studies for conducting the survey. Christian Calientes of Population Research Institute at the Pennsylvania State University kindly prepared the maps in Chapters 1 and 2. David R. Johnson of the University of Nebraska contributed significantly with his sampling design for our survey. The readers for Cambridge University Press were uncommonly insightful and helpful in offering suggestions to strengthen the version of the book that they read.

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