An assessment of racism in Dakota, Ramsey, and Washington counties

Executive Summary

January 2004

Summary of anti-racism advisory committee topic papers

Definitions of racism

The word "racism" is used and understood in many ways including stereotyping, negative feelings or prejudice; differential treatment that is unfair or discriminatory; deliberate exclusion or blocked access to resources (which includes avoiding people from other races and refusing to get to know them); one racial group's assumption that its members are superior to members of other groups; and discrimination or bias by institutions or formal organizations.

- In the survey, over half of the people surveyed define racism as stereotyping, negative feelings, or prejudice toward a group whose characteristics do not match those of the majority population.

- In our community conversations, stereotyping and differential treatment of various kinds were the most commonly expressed themes; however, definitions tended to be detailed and based on personal experiences, ranging from subtle and polite indifference to outright hate.

- Few people in the survey or in the community conversations define racism as structural or institutionalized discrimination or bias.

- For racism to be discussed and addressed, we would benefit from a common understanding. Considering the wide variation in definition, there may be a better term to use than "racism."

Personal experiences with racism

All groups report experiencing racism in their day-to-day lives, often beginning when they were youngsters. African Americans report this more than any other group.

- In our survey, 61 percent of Black/African-Americans, 34 percent of American Indians, and 36 percent of Latinos say they are followed or watched by security guards or clerks in stores as if they might steal merchandise. Across all racial groups surveyed, an average of 19 percent say they have been called insulting names related to their skin color.

- In our community conversations, participants recounted times when they were insulted by Whites, based on their race. Most of the examples occurred during the participants' school years. The issue of racial profiling by the police was a theme that also occurred frequently in the community discussions. Discrimination when utilizing

health care services also emerged as a common theme. Many participants in the community conversations expressed the opinion that race relations have worsened since September 11, 2001.

■ Racist language and stereotypes interfere with people's ability to go about their normal daily activities, including affecting their health.

Attitudes about racial others

All racial groups report some level of discomfort around people of other races. Asians report the highest level of discomfort around people from other races, followed by Latinos and American Indians. Blacks/African-Americans and Whites report the lowest levels of discomfort around people from other races.

■ In our survey, 37 percent say that they get nervous walking into a room of people from other races, if they are the only one of their own race present; and over 40 percent "strongly" or "somewhat" agree that people of other races don't want to get to know them, because of their race. Almost one-third "strongly" or "somewhat" agree that they would like to get to know people of other races better, but often feel as if they might be ridiculed or shamed if they say the wrong thing.

■ Several of the community conversation participants alluded to tensions with other racial groups, primarily commenting on intense competition among communities of color for jobs and other scarce resources. All racial groups expressed animosity towards new immigrants.

Attitudes toward immigrants and immigrants' own attitudes toward racial others

According the Census, more than 78,000 residents in Dakota, Ramsey and Washington Counties were not born in the U.S. This is about 30 percent of all immigrants in Minnesota. Of these, 41,138 live in St. Paul, 18,049 live in Dakota County, 13,125 in suburban Ramsey County, and 6,860 in Washington County. In general, we found more animosity than compassion towards immigrants.

■ On average, two of every three people (67%) surveyed say that immigrants should overcome prejudice and work their way up without special favors.

■ Community conversations with Blacks/African-Americans, Whites, and Latinos included numerous negative attitudes toward immigrants, some compassion for immigrants, and a sense that American-born oppressed groups find themselves pitted against new immigrant groups to "fight over crumbs." Latinos in particular described being stereotyped and resented as illegal aliens.

Housing and neighborhoods

Many residents in the three counties have personal relationships with people of other races and express a desire to have neighbors of all races. Still, housing discrimination happens when people seek a place to live as well as once they move in.

- In our survey, about a quarter say that they have family members of another race, and 72 percent indicate that they have at least one close friend who is of another race.

- 64 percent interact regularly with at least one neighbor of a different race.

- Rates of home ownership in 2000 were: 76 percent for Whites; 32 percent for Blacks/African Americans; 42 percent for American Indians; 51 percent for Asians; and 46 percent for Hispanics/Latinos.

- In our survey, 77 percent of residents feel that most White people prefer to live in areas where most of their neighbors are White; however, 59 percent say that they do not have a preference about the race of their neighbors, and 26 percent prefer neighbors of various races.

- In our survey, 4 percent of Black/African-Americans, 3 percent of Hmong, 2 percent of American Indians, and 5 percent of Latinos report they have been refused housing in the past two years, because of their race. No Whites say they have had this experience.

- In our community conversations, participants described some of the ways in which housing discrimination occurs, including landlords saying apartments are no longer available once they see the race of the individual and perceived discrimination by realtors and mortgage companies. Southeast Asians in particular complained about housing inspections, which caused barriers to home ownership or made the process much more labor-intensive for the buyers.

- The community conversations also noted that renters and homeowners of color face challenges from neighbors once they are living in their new neighborhoods, including alienation, isolation, and blatant racist behavior from neighbors such as being called racial names and being told to "go back home." They also described repeated incidents of mistreatment of new residents of color by neighborhood police officers.

Economics and employment

Income disparities by race persist, and some grew in the past 10 years. Racism may contribute to this gap through, among other factors, hiring discrimination; mistreatment, exploitation, and alienation on the job; and the inaccessibility or inadequacy of human rights intervention.

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- From 1990 to 2000, per capita income increased for all races. Per capita income in 2000 was: $27,862 for Whites; $16,727 for Blacks; $16,281 for American Indians; $19,059 for Asians; and $14,246 for Hispanics/Latinos.

- In our survey, about half "strongly" or "somewhat" agree that generations of mistreatment have made it difficult for certain groups of color to achieve financial success.

- In our community conversations, participants spoke about the hiring process, and shared many stories and instances of discrimination that they identified based on their own personal experiences, including discrimination based on skin color and attire; discrimination based on name; and perceived discrimination based on English language ability.

- Conversations and interviews also identified a whole host of issues once individuals have been hired, including receiving lower compensation for their labor than the White employees, not being hired on a permanent basis, and being mistreated by White people who "talk down" to them and order them around. Both Hmong and Latino participants mentioned that their reputation for being "hard workers" led to exploitation in terms of being assigned more work, and more arduous work, compared to employees of other backgrounds. Many employees of color described their sense of exclusion and alienation.

Education

In St. Paul, 70 percent of students in the public schools are students of color. The largest groups of color are Asian students (30%), followed by African-American students (27%). Two percent of all St. Paul students are American Indian, 11 percent are Latino/Hispanic, and 30 percent are White. Students of color comprise 17 percent of suburban Ramsey public schools, 10 percent of Dakota schools, and 6 percent of Washington schools.

Disparities in high school and college graduation rates by race are striking. The ways that racism may contribute to this include: inadequate or harmful curriculum and instruction, neglectful schools, verbal and physical mistreatment by other students based on race, and low or unreasonably high expectations for some students. Discrimination, verbal harassment, and social exclusion seem to increase from elementary school to high school.

- On-time high school graduation rates differed for different racial groups in the three counties, with White (87%) and Asian students (71%) having the highest graduation rates. On-time high school graduation rates are 57 percent for Latino students, 56 percent for American Indian students, and 51 percent for African American students.

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- In the three counties, the odds of completing college in 2000, compared to Whites, was 85 percent for Asians, half for African Americans, 38 percent for American Indians, and 33 percent for Latinos.

- In the community conversations, participants were concerned about the messages underlying curriculum, and particularly how this, combined with unprepared teachers, may affect the self-esteem of children and their school achievement. They also expressed concerns about the racially and culturally-based verbal harassment that children are subjected to at school. Somali and Middle Eastern respondents mentioned mistreatment based on appearance and clothing, and based on larger socio-political developments. Hmong participants recounted being harassed about language. Besides the verbal harassment, children of color also are socially excluded and experience a sense of rejection by their fellow classmates and feel singled out and treated unfairly by school administration. Finally, some teachers assume low academic ability, which may become a self-fulfilling prophecy; while some Asian parents point to unreasonably high expectations for their children.

Responses to racism

Responses to racism are as varied as the definitions of racism. Many residents in the three counties are comfortable speaking out against acts of racism. Among communities of color, responses to racism run the gamut from internalized self-hatred and depression to acting in the same racist manner.

- In our survey, 60 percent of people in the general sample say they feel "very" or "somewhat" comfortable about speaking up in defense of a victim of racism.

- About one-fourth of Black/African-Americans (25%) and American Indians (22%) say they have felt emotionally upset within the past 30 days as a result of how they were treated based on their race. Lower proportions of Hmong (16%), Latinos (17%) and Whites (4%) report this experience.

- In our community conversations, participants and key informants across all of the racial groups had much to share about responses to racism. All agreed that racism causes much emotional, psychological and spiritual damage, for individuals, families, and communities. This emotional and spiritual harm can manifest itself as depression or as physical illness. One common response to encountering racism was simply embarrassment and having a sense of shame. Another common reaction was fear. For Latino immigrants, in particular, a response of fear can be related to their immigration status and their efforts to secure citizenship in the United States.

- Several groups identified the internalization of racism and a feeling of self-hatred as one of the most destructive responses to racism. Both the African-American and the American Indian conversations explored this topic in-depth.

- Many groups identified avoidance as a common response to racism. This includes staying away from places where they've been treated poorly or pursuing a type of psychological or emotional avoidance. Participants from a range of Asian backgrounds described a response to racism that was marked by a refusal to engage. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that all Asian groups never engage in a more direct confrontation. The community conversations brought to light a few examples where people did try to deal with difficulties caused by racism more directly.

- Anger was also a response to racism that was identified through the community conversations. *Coraje* is a concept related to that of anger, and it was cited by Latinos as one of their responses to racism.

- Some participants identified more active ways of "fighting racism" such as using institutions and organized resources to counteract racism.

- Several participants mentioned assimilation and integration as a response to racism. Others identified taking on the attitudes of the oppressors and becoming racist themselves.

The "unengaged"

Whites and communities of color share common beliefs about racial justice. A relatively small proportion of residents are actually "disengaged;" however, they are more likely to be part of the traditional "power elite" and stand out from others as not acknowledging they have certain advantages that are a result of being White.

- In our survey, based on an analysis that combined responses to several items, about half of all racial groups fall into the Great Middle category, stating no preferences about the race of their neighbors and mixed beliefs about structural inequalities, with some belief in the injustice caused by racism.

- Among Whites, 24 percent would prefer to live in racially mixed neighborhoods and have at least some belief in the injustice caused by racism (Integrated/Engaged); 13 percent state no preference with regard to the race of their neighbors and do not believe in structural inequalities (Disengaged); 12 percent prefer to live with other Whites and have mixed beliefs about structural inequalities (Isolated/Unengaged); and 2 percent prefer to live with other Whites and do not believe in structural inequalities (Structurally Disengaged).

- The 24 percent of Whites characterized as Integrated/Engaged make up a larger proportion of residents in Ramsey County than elsewhere; are more often female, college educated, and renters; and more likely to describe themselves as unaffiliated religiously and Democrat.

- The 13 percent of Whites categorized as Disengaged make up a larger proportion of residents in Washington County than elsewhere and are more likely to be higher income and to describe themselves as Republican and very conservative.

- 42 percent of Black/African Americans, 38 percent of American Indians, and 24 percent of Latinos/Hispanics can be described as Integrated/Engaged, compared to 24 percent of Whites.

- Overall, 45 percent of White respondents report they have certain advantages because of their race. The Isolated/Unengaged and the Integrated/Engaged are the most likely to acknowledge these advantages or White privilege (61% and 59% respectively). The Great Middle is about evenly divided (44% "Yes" and 56% "No"). The Disengaged is by far the least likely to acknowledge White privilege (13%).

- The words of residents in several community conversations described the subtle and harmful nature of White privilege. Others depicted a kind of privilege that was both unaware and somewhat arrogant.

Overview of past and current anti-racism initiatives

Initiatives ranged from programs led by a small number of volunteer or paid staff focusing on a very specific population (such as a particular neighborhood or children of a specific age in a particular school district), to multifaceted programs with multiple staff people and a wide geographic range. Program budgets also varied greatly, ranging from just a few thousand dollars a year to nearly $4 million annually. Programs ranged in age from less than a year (10 months) to more than 50 years in duration.

Recurring strategies include:

- Raising awareness about the existence of racism, racial discrimination, and racial disparities, particularly with regard to communities experiencing recent and rapid demographic changes.

- Increasing opportunities for inter-racial/ethnic/cultural contact and exchange through such venues as faith communities, schools, neighborhoods, and business settings.

- Increasing leadership, decision-making power, and civic engagement within American Indian communities and communities of color.

- Educating American Indian communities and communities of color about their rights and resources available to them, across areas such as education, housing, health care.

- Working with White communities to increase awareness of White privilege and racism.

- Working with organizations and institutions to identify and eliminate systemic, institutionalized racism.

Key themes and issues:

- The perceived lack of outcome measurements and assessments that truly capture the impact of the work undertaken in diverse communities.

- The importance of follow-through and action.

- The importance of organizational diversity, leadership from and empowerment of communities of color.

- The importance of adopting a holistic/flexible approach.

- The importance of partnerships and relationships.

- Understanding the interrelationships among different forms of prejudice and discrimination.

Suggestions for addressing racism

We gathered suggestions for addressing racism in the survey of residents, community conversations, and key informant interviews.

- In our survey, the most popular strategy in all three counties involves educating the public in a variety of institutional settings about diversity, power and privilege, stereotypes and the more subtle forms of racism. The second most popular strategy across the three counties involves increasing contact between diverse groups through regular large community events where Whites and minority groups can engage in common social activities. Residents of the three counties are least enthusiastic about strategies having to do with systems change, such as to "pressure governmental officials and legislators to set policies and practices that will create a more equal society."

- In our community conversations, groups of all races emphasized individual-level changes, such as modeling accountability, being pro-active, taking social justice action as individuals, and building acceptance for all racial groups. They also discussed community-level changes, such as improving relations across racial and ethnic communities through dialogue, collaboration, and engaging families in neighborhoods. Less often, community conversations discussed changing all sorts of institutions, including housing, business and workplaces, police and courts, government, schools, churches, media, and health care.

- Key informants more often emphasized institutional issues and institutional solutions.

Research team recommendations

The research team of Wilder Research Center and Roy Wilkins Center recommends three broad strategies for eradicating racism in St. Paul and the surrounding communities in Dakota, Ramsey, and Washington counties.

1. Encourage and support efforts to bring diverse people together in order to improve mutual understanding, acceptance, and respect among all racial groups. Faith communities should take a leadership role.

2. Address racism at the individual level by identifying and communicating through media campaigns ways that all racial groups benefit from and share a mutual self-interest in improved race relations. White community and business leaders may be in the best position to influence improvements in race relations.

3. Address racism at the institutional level in workplaces and schools by providing holistic models of inclusion and incentives for changing institutional behavior.

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Researchers associated with this project

Amherst H. Wilder Foundation
Wilder Research Center

Dr. Richard Chase

Dr. Paul Mattessich (Co-Project Leader)

Dr. Lyungai Mbilinyi

Orkideh Mohajeri-Anderson

Dr. Sandi Pierce

Annette Toews

Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs
Roy Wilkins Center for Human Relations and Social Justice
University of Minnesota

Allan Malkis

Dr. Samuel Myers

Julie Nielsen

Sharon Sayles-Belton (Co-Project Leader)

Bosu Seo

Dr. Charlotte Voight

Community partners

Rainbow Research, Inc.

T. Williams

Margaret Celebrezze

Assata Brown (BRAIN Consultant)

Kate Seng (Consultant)

Iman Ighazalla (Consultant)

Huda Farah (Consultant)

HACER

Jared Erdmann

Claudia Fuentes

American Indian Policy Research Center

John Poupart

Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans

David Zander