

# **At the Crossroads: Olmsted County 2016 Racial Attitudes and Actions Survey**

## **Summary Brief, September 2017**

**Survey conducted and reported on by Dr. Charlotte A. Kunkel and Dr. Ron Ferguson, professors at Luther College and members of the Diversity Council Board of Directors**

In the spring of 2016 we collected data from Olmsted County in the third installment of the Racial Attitudes and Actions Survey. Data was previously collected in 1990 and 2006. In 2006 we reported increased anti- Black and anti- immigrant sentiment. We set out to see what changed ten years later.

The latest version of the survey was shorter, available in electronic form, and selected from a random sample of Olmsted County residents. We mailed nearly 2400 surveys, a postcard reminder, and a second mailing to these households. Our response rate was 15 percent (N=345), identical to the response rate in 2006 despite our including an incentive and making an electronic version available. This is similar to national survey response rates to surveys of controversial content.

The 2016 participant population is slightly older, wealthier and whiter than Olmsted County in general, and the nation. The average age of respondents is 51, their average income is above \$100, 000 dollars, and 89 percent are white. More women than men responded (69% are women). They are also more educated with fully 40 percent reporting some education beyond college or university.

The general feel of the qualitative and quantitative results is positive. Respondents write that diversity is growing and welcome in Olmsted County. For example, "I think Rochester in general is a very open community & prides itself on diverse cultures, " and "Minorities bring wonderful contributions to a community that everyone benefits from..."

Quantitative data also shows positive change. Respondents report less negative attitudes toward Blacks, South Asians, Hispanics, and Somalis than they did in 2006, each a statistically significant change. Fewer respondents agreed that Blacks or Somalis were "naturally" more violent, for example. More respondents thought folks of color maintained their lawns as well as whites and tended to work rather than live off welfare. More respondents thought it was OK for whites to dine, date and marry peoples from all racial/ethnic categories in the survey, than in 2006.

New to the 2016 survey, we asked respondents about their experiences and perceptions of life in Olmsted County, if they felt "...they had an equal chance at getting a job," for example. And the respondents' answers differed by race. While only 15 percent of whites disagreed that they had an equal chance at getting a job, 29 percent of respondents of color disagreed. While only 2 percent of whites thought they had been pulled over by police because of their race or ethnicity, 14 percent of people of color did so. Fifteen percent of white respondents disagreed that children of different races were treated fairly in school, while 37 percent of people of color disagreed that treatment was fair. While three percent of white respondents said they disagreed that they had equal chance to buy a house in a neighborhood in which they would want to live, 16 percent of respondents of color did so.

The difference in racialized responses was a statistically significant difference for police stops, education and housing. Admittedly, the importance of these differences is weakened by the low number of respondents of color.

In addition to differing experiences based on racial identity, other trends are also concerning in 2016. Anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiments are common in the qualitative responses. For example, when asked if they were concerned about immigration, respondents wrote, “Muslims especially - They want to take over. Other minorities are ok,” and, “Accept USA for what it is! Let our Holidays remain!! Speak English and get a job-pay your own way!!” Overt racism is fairly common in a number of qualitative responses.

Also troubling is that Olmsted county residents in this sample are still highly segregated by race. In 2016, 51% of white respondents said they do not interact regularly with anyone of a different race, compared to 50% in 2006. 78% of white respondents said they have no close friends of a different race, compared to 80% of white respondents in 2006. These responses reflect relatively little change in the last 10 years.

Other areas of increased interaction are evident, yet minimal. In 2016 only 58% of white respondents said they do not work closely with anyone of a different race which is down from 80% in 2006. 64% of white respondents said they do not have close neighbors of a different race compared to 75% in 2006, and 61% said they have not recently invited someone of another race for dinner (65% in 2006). What we notice is that a large majority of whites are racially segregated in their lives and that many respondents simply interact less than they did in 2006—with anyone (3% said they never engage in social activities with friends). Additionally, 36% percent of white respondents said they only had one interaction with friends in the last month (increase from 28% in 2006). Putnam (2000) has described this phenomenon as “turtling” meaning we pull our heads into our shells, or pull ourselves into our homes, rather than interact with others. Interestingly, 65% of white respondents said their children had friends of another race, compared with 54% in 2006. So it may be that our children will be more integrated.

In conclusion, the 2016 Olmsted County Racial Attitudes and Actions Survey has found that while positive attitudes toward racial others have increased, segregation nonetheless continues. People are connecting less and tensions are evident. Anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-Black sentiment is still common in Olmsted County. Blacks and Somalis are still perceived differently (more negatively) than other groups of color. Some trends in the data are positive, but troubles persist. Olmsted County may be at the crossroads as to whether we wholeheartedly embrace the diversity in our midst or tuck our heads and simply hope someone else does the job.