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Major Findings for Racial Affairs in Middle Tennessee Fall 2000

This survey, concentrating on racial issues in Middle Tennessee, featured an oversample of African Americans in order to represent black opinion more accurately. Though blacks make up about 11% of the area population, we were able to weight results equally to highlight black-white differences where they exist. Here are summaries of the major findings:

Whites have mixed feelings about affirmative action. Most whites and blacks agree that affirmative action provides women and minorities with needed help, although nearly two-thirds of whites (64%) say the policy amounts to reverse discrimination. Whites, but not blacks, are therefore ambivalent about affirmative action.

What's the state's top problem? Blacks say crime, whites education. Among blacks, crime is named most often as the number-one problem facing the state of Tennessee (26%). Among whites, by contrast, the most common pick is education (23%). Using standard survey methods, we might never notice this, because 21% of all respondents name education as the biggest problem, about the same as the 19% who felt likewise in spring 2000.

Near majority of whites, blacks feel race relations are improving. Most African Americans and whites in Middle Tennessee say that race relations are about the same (48% white; 51% black) or improving (39% for each group).

Blacks more wary than whites of police. Only 17% of blacks express a great deal of confidence in police compared to 37% of whites. Fully one-half (50%), however, say Metro Police Chief Emmett Turner is doing an excellent or good job.

Striking economic differences between races. The median income in Middle Tennessee is \$40,000 to \$45,000, but the median income among African Americans it is \$25,000 to \$30,000. White residents (76%) are also more likely to own their own home than black residents (47%).

Whites, and some blacks, say that lack of motivation hinders blacks. Among white Middle Tennesseans, half believe that racial disparities result from lack of motivation among African Americans. In contrast, 58% of African Americans disagreed. Interestingly, 32% of the African Americans in our sample also agreed that blacks lack the motivation to succeed.

No racial differences regarding area growth, life quality. Growth in Middle Tennessee may have changed many things, but the majority (55%) of all races find that recent changes have made life generally better here. Males (63%) judge change more positively than females (47%).

Other findings: Blacks are more concerned than whites about the fairness of the justice system. Hispanics are still struggling for acceptance. There are few racial differences in political involvement, but religious attendance tends to be an important predictor.

Details of findings

Whites have mixed feelings about affirmative action

Fully 71% of whites and 87% of African Americans agree that affirmative action helps qualified women and minorities get well-deserved access to schools and jobs. And 50% of whites and 75% of African Americans agree that affirmative action programs provide needed compensation for past and current discrimination. However, 64% of whites also agree that affirmative action is a form of reverse discrimination, while 61% of African Americans disagree.

African American respondents (47%) were more likely than whites (23%) to report that they knew someone who had been helped by affirmative action. And only 10 to 15% of either group reported that they knew someone who had been harmed by affirmative action. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this finding is that 72% of whites in our survey report having no personal experience of affirmative action programs, either positive or negative, while only about half of the African Americans report direct personal experience with such programs.

Some have proposed a new type of affirmative action program that would target economically disadvantaged people regardless of race. Most respondents, blacks and whites alike, voice a high level of support for such a change. Fully 77% of Middle Tennesseans say that programs should be targeted to low-income families.

When we asked whether successful African Americans should feel obligated to help less successful African Americans, 64% of black respondents said yes, but only 44% of whites agreed.

What's the state's top problem? Blacks say crime, whites say education

Black and white Middle Tennesseans hold very different views about the top problem facing the state. More than one-fourth (26%) of African American respondents said crime is the most important problem facing Tennessee, the group's most frequently mentioned problem. In contrast, 23% of whites said education is the most important problem, their most common response. A full 67% of African Americans said they talked about crime often.

Near majority of whites, blacks feel race relations are improving

Most African Americans and whites in Middle Tennessee say that race relations are about the same (48% white; 51% black) or improving (39% for each group). Only 13% of whites and 10% of blacks feel relations are getting worse.

Although both groups claim race relations are improving, they still live in largely separate worlds where housing is concerned. Fully 60% of white respondents reported that they live in mostly white neighborhoods, and 40% of African Americans said they live in mostly black neighborhoods. Thirty-seven percent of white respondents said they live in mixed neighborhoods, while 47% of African Americans reported their neighborhoods to be racially mixed. Overall, 58% of our sample reported living in racially homogenous neighborhoods.

Still, just 35% of white respondents and 21% of African Americans reported that all of their ten closest friends are of the same race that they are. Overall, 34% of our respondents reported that all ten of their closest friends are of the same race that they are, and 62% reported that two or fewer of their closest friends are of another race.

Only 40% of white respondent said that they have had a person of another race over for dinner in the last six months, while 54% of our African American respondents said the same. Fifty-nine percent of our respondents reported that they have not had anyone of another race over for dinner in the past six months. In general, African Americans are more likely to have relationships with whites than whites are to have relationships with African Americans. It seems likely that because of their minority status, African Americans are more likely to encounter whites while whites have fewer opportunities to make contact with African Americans should they want to and more opportunities to avoid African Americans if they wish.

Blacks more wary than whites of police

While more than one-third of whites (37%) express a great deal of confidence in law enforcement officials, less than one-fifth of blacks (17%) agree. Nearly one-third of blacks (33%) say they have hardly any confidence in police, and half (50%) say they have only some. However, education is also an effective predictor here, with half of college graduates displaying a great deal of confidence in police, compared to less than one-third (31%) of those with lower education levels.

African Americans also believe that racism is a major problem among police officers in Middle Tennessee. One-third say that racism is very common among police officers, and another 48% say it is fairly common. Whites may also be concerned about racism in the police force: 43% of white respondents agreed that racism is very common or fairly common among police officers. Blacks are far more concerned about racial profiling, with 77% finding it a major problem in Middle Tennessee, while 56% of whites said it was not a problem.

African Americans were about as likely as whites to say they or someone they knew had been stopped recently by police (54% of whites and 53% of African Americans). But blacks (38%), when compared with whites (17%), were more likely to report that they or someone they knew had been arrested.

Surprisingly, African Americans (39%) were not dramatically more likely than whites (27%) to report feeling that the police had treated them unfairly. This difference is marginally significant statistically but does not approach the spectacular differences of opinion that blacks and whites express when asked about police performance in general.

Meanwhile, confidence in state and local government shows no racial difference. About two-thirds of respondents report only some confidence in both state (64%) and local (62%) government. Older people typically show more confidence than those who are younger.

Police Chief Turner, Mayor Purcell rate above Gov. Sundquist

African Americans' lower level of confidence does not extend to Metro Police Chief Emmett Turner, who is black, nor are whites skeptical of Turner's performance. Despite recent controversies, Turner receives good job ratings from Middle Tennesseans, regardless of race. Fully one-half (50%) say Turner is doing an excellent or good job. But Mayor Bill Purcell scores even better, with nearly two-thirds (61%) giving him an excellent or good rating. By contrast, less than one-third (32%) rate Gov. Don Sundquist as high. Incidentally, more Democrats (55%) than Republicans (41%) judge Sundquist's performance as fair.

Economic differences between races striking

There is also a big lag between blacks and whites economically. Although African Americans and whites living in Middle Tennessee are about equally likely to have full time jobs (about 56% report that they work full-time, while 63% of those who are married report that spouses work full time), African Americans earn less on average. The median income in Middle Tennessee is \$40,000 to \$45,000, but median income among African Americans is only \$25,000 to \$30,000. White Middle Tennesseans (76%) are also far more likely to own their own home than black Middle Tennesseans (47%).

Whites, and some Blacks, say that lack of motivation hinders blacks

Racist assertions that blacks have less inborn ability to learn have more or less disappeared in Middle Tennessee. About 90% of whites and 85% of African Americans said that income and employment differences between the two groups were not the result of African Americans' innate intellectual abilities.

However, white Middle Tennesseans tend not to believe that African Americans are the victims of discrimination. Only 15% of whites agreed that income and employment differences between whites and blacks are due to discrimination. More than three-quarters of whites (77%) said discrimination was not the cause. By contrast, about 50% of African Americans believe that discrimination is one reason for the differences.

A slightly larger proportion of our white respondents, about 24%, said that income and employment disparities between whites and blacks were due to a lack of educational opportunity for blacks, but 65% of whites rejected this explanation. Among African Americans, however, nearly a majority (47%) said that a lack of educational opportunity was a reason African Americans had worse jobs and made less money than whites.

Among white Middle Tennesseans, half believe that racial disparities result from lack of motivation among African Americans. In contrast, 58% of African Americans disagreed. Some political observers, incidentally, have argued that the belief that blacks lack motivation represents a new form of racism that has largely replaced traditional racist views. Interestingly, 32% of the African Americans in our sample also agreed that blacks lack the motivation to succeed, and 33% of African Americans said differences between African Americans and whites in jobs and income are not due to discrimination.

No racial differences regarding area growth, life quality

Growth in Middle Tennessee may have changed many things, but the majority (55%) of all races find that recent changes have made life generally better here – even more than in our spring 2000 survey, where 46% were positive toward such change. In fall 1998, in fact, only 37% felt likewise, a notable upward trend. Males (63%) judge change more positively than females (47%), but racial differences are not significant.

Only 40%, however, believe that these changes have made their own lives better, and those with more education seem to have been the beneficiaries. While a majority (51%) of those with trade school or college training find improvement, less than one-fourth (22%) of those with high school education or less agree.

More males (75%) than females (61%) believe that the Tennessee Titans football team has improved the quality of life, but, again, there are no racial differences despite the fact that many Titans stars are African American. Fully 56% also feel that the Nashville Predators hockey team has improved life here.

African Americans more concerned about justice system than whites

The concerns of African Americans about the justice system extend beyond police performance. More than one in four (79%) of black respondents said they think the American justice system treats people of their race more harshly. More than half of whites (59%), however, believe that juries treat both races equally.

While both whites and blacks seem to agree that black juries are no more likely to convict a white defendant than a black defendant, blacks believe that white juries are more likely to convict black defendants than white ones. Only 33% of white respondents believe that white juries are more likely to convict black defendants, while 71% of African American respondents believe likewise. About 70% of each group believes that blacks are no more likely to convict white defendants than they are to convict black ones.

Given their deep doubts about the justice system, it is unsurprising that African Americans in Middle Tennessee exhibit far less support for the death penalty than whites do. Asked what they believe should be the maximum penalty for murder, 63% of whites opted for the death penalty, while 34% supported life imprisonment without the possibility of parole. In stark contrast, only 35% of African Americans supported the death penalty while 53% favored life imprisonment without possibility of parole.

While 26% of whites believed that executing an innocent person is not at all likely, only 9% of African Americans agree. A full 80% of blacks support suspending the death penalty in Middle Tennessee because innocent people may be executed. Only half of whites concur.

Mexicans, Hispanics still struggling for acceptance among the less educated

Almost one-third (32%) of Middle Tennesseans feel that Mexican and other Hispanic immigrants have made life worse in the region. Blacks and whites do not differ significantly in such attitudes. Here, education seems to be the key, with only 15% of college graduates judging that such immigrants have harmed life in Middle Tennessee. However, four in 10 (43%) of those with a high school education or less feel that Hispanic immigrants make life worse. Fewer - about a third - of respondents with some college or trade school concur.

Asian immigrants fare much better. Only 17% of Middle Tennesseans feel that Asians have made life worse. Again, education – but not race – plays a major role, with nearly one-fourth (23%) with a high school or less expressing negative feelings, compared with 13% of those with trade school training or above. It is important to emphasize that, in all cases, a majority of Middle Tennesseans feel that such immigrants have had either no impact or a positive impact on life in the region.

Few racial differences in political involvement

Except for voting, most Middle Tennesseans report little political activity in the last five years. Few (13%) have worked in campaigns, and less than one-third (31%) have contributed money to campaigns, though about one-half of college graduates have contributed, compared to just

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over one-third (35%) with some college or trade experience and less than one-fifth (17%) with a high school education or less.

Few (9%) have volunteered for government boards and committees, and only about one-third (33%) have attended a local government meeting. Something approaching one-half (45%) have, however, attended a meeting of a community or neighborhood. More whites (34%) than blacks (19%) have attended neighborhood meetings. Church attendance is also an important predictor of community involvement, with more than half (51%) of those who attend worship once a month or more participating, compared to about one-third (34%) who attend seldom or never.

With reported voting behavior, there are again no racial differences. A heavy majority (86%) reported that they are registered to vote, surely an overstatement of the facts. Those with some college or above report near universal (95%) registration, compared to those with lower education levels (76%).

Nearly half of respondents (45%) report that they vote all the time. Here, again, church attendance is important, with nearly two-thirds (62%) who attend weekly reporting that they vote all of the time. This compares with 48% who attend once a month or about almost every week, 37% who seldom attend, and 34% who never attend.

Middle Tennesseans also talk frequently about political topics. Though our survey was taken during an election and may overstate typical behavior, nearly half (49%) report that they often talk about national affairs, and just over one-third (36%) often talk about state government. More than half talk often about education (53%). And nearly half (48%) talk often about crime, with significantly more engagement by African Americans (67%) than by whites (46%).

With political talk, religious service attendance is again an important predictor. For example, fully 58% of those who attend at least once a month talk about national affairs, compared to 39% who attend seldom or never. Interestingly, where talk about local government is concerned, Episcopalians, Lutherans, United Methodists, and Church of Christ members talk most (61% responded with "often"). Baptists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and other Christians talk less (32% responded with "often").

Sample and Method

The poll was conducted by telephone from Oct. 23 to Nov. 10, 2000, by the Office of Communication Research at Middle Tennessee State University. Communication Research faculty were responsible for the questionnaire, sampling method, and results. Trained students interviewed 438 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the 39 counties making up Middle Tennessee. The poll has an estimated error margin of ± 4.7 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. Theoretically, this means that a sample of this size should produce a statistical portrait of the population accurate within 4.7 percentage points 95 out of 100 times, though the divergence is often less. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups. Other factors, such as question wording, can also affect the outcome of a survey.

For the results reported here, the statistical influence of white respondents was weighted downward to match the statistical influence of blacks. This weighting procedure helped highlight white-black differences where they exist. The sample was also weighted to better reflect the latest age and gender breakdowns for Middle Tennessee obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau. Here are relevant percentages:

Demographic	Population	Original Sample	Weight	Weighted Sample
Age 18-34	30.49%	28.5%	1.07	31.9%
Age 35-49	32.88%	39.7%	0.83	31.5%
Age 50-64	20.86%	20.0%	1.04	21.8%
Age 65 up	15.77%	11.9%	1.33	14.8%
Male	47.66%	42.0%	1.13	46.4%
Female	52.34%	58.0%	0.90	53.6%
White	87.23%	63.7%	0.48	49.0%
Black	11.48%	30.8%	1.00	48.0%
Other	1.30%	5.5%	0.24	2.20%

Once black/white differences were discovered with an equally weighted sample, the sample was re-weighted to reflect the entire Middle Tennessee area. This proportionally weighted sample was used to express overall opinion in this report

The Middle Tennessee Poll, begun in 1998, is a twice-a-year assessment of attitudes in Middle Tennessee. MTSU's College of Mass Communication, School of Journalism, and John Seigenthaler Chair of First Amendment Studies provide funding.