INTRODUCTION

Racial residential segregation is one of the main factors that contributes to racial inequality in the United States. Blacks at all social class levels tend to be more racially segregated than Whites.

Some Black families manage to integrate into predominantly White neighborhoods. Most of these families tend to be middle-class moving into affluent White neighborhoods. Many White residents believe that an influx of Black families leads to more crime, lower property values, and worse schools. In turn, they engage in White flight by leaving the transitional neighborhood for predominantly White neighborhoods.

Little research has explored how perceptions of neighborhood racial composition may affect social interactions among neighbors. Using a sample of middle-class Blacks and Whites living in urban and suburban areas, this study investigated how the perceived racial composition of neighborhoods lead to different outcomes among these groups.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS: Middle-Class Blacks and Whites from urban and suburban areas, ages 22-64. Quantitative- (N=635), Participants were divided into four groups, which included Black women (N=338), Black men (N=93), White women (N=100), White men (N=104). Qualitative- (N=379), which included Black women (N=210), Black men (N= 43), White women (N= 73), and White men (N=53).

MATERIALS: (a) Census Bureau data on racial composition by zip codes. (b) The Barriers and Incentives to Physical Activity Survey. Online survey to examine perceptions of neighborhood racial composition.

PROCEDURE: (a) Quantitative- We compared the (real) racial composition to the (perceived) racial composition by asking all participants to specify the amount of Whites, Blacks, and other minorities in their neighborhoods.

(b) Qualitative- We focused on a particular question that asked participants, How well do they get along with their neighbors? If the participants’ response was not Strongly Agree they were asked to write a response explaining why don’t they get along better with their neighbors.

Our focus was to compare and contrast the responses among all groups to indicate differences in neighbor relations.

RESULTS

Quantitative- Our results for the quantitative section indicate Blacks are more likely to live in neighborhoods with more Blacks and more minorities. On the contrary, Whites are more likely to live in neighborhoods with more Whites. Results also showed that Blacks live in zip codes with denser populations.

Qualitative- All groups reported not being able to get along better with their neighbors because of the transitional neighborhoods they live in. Black women, compared to other groups, reported experiencing more benign neglect and hostility from their neighbors.

• Black Women revealed 5 major themes. Participants reported that: racial differences, age differences, transitional neighborhoods, benign neglect, and hostility were all barriers for not being able to get along better with their neighbors.

“...a predominantly white area where African Americans are still not accepted by the whole community.”

“The neighborhood has changed, people are moving in and out.”

• A few Black Men reported transitional neighborhoods, benign neglect, and hostility as barriers for interaction.

“They are pretty racist.”

“I live in an apartment and my neighbors change every few months.”

• White Women reported transitional neighborhood and hostility were barriers for not being able to get along better with their neighbors.

“There are people living on my street who are self righteous, self centered morons who have been disrespectful and mean to me.”

• White men reported similar experiences to White women.

“...neighborhood has changed from owner to renters, so most of my neighbors move frequently.”

“Some people are hard to get along with no matter how hard I try.”

DISCUSSION

Media, residential segregation, racial stereotypes, and perception of group threat are all factors that cause Whites to overestimate the percentage of Blacks in their neighborhoods.

Overestimating the Black population suggests that the neighborhoods of Whites are more diverse. In reality, however, these misperceptions help maintain White privilege and the extent to which racism shapes the lives of racial minorities.

Our study illustrates how the experiences of middle-class Blacks is limited in terms of supportive neighbor relations, high quality schools for their children, and community engagement through environmental stewardship and physical activity.

Avenues to decrease discrimination, criminalization, benign neglect, and hostility can be accomplished by making policies and initiatives that create more racially integrated neighborhoods.

REFERENCES
