BLACK AND WHITE PERSPECTIVES ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN BOSTON

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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by

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Introduction

In the spring of 1981 a probability sample of Boston residents with telephones was interviewed about their perceptions and feelings deemed likely to be relevant to their quality of life. A main goal of The Boston Committee is to develop a program that will ease racial tension and improve the quality of race relations in Boston. To do that, one useful step is to identify the areas in people's lives that are problematic and the extent to which people's problems either are or are not related to their racial backgrounds. This survey was designed to provide an objective, factual basis for that kind of assessment.

Questions were posed in non-racial terms. They applied equally to people of all ethnic backgrounds. In addition, for the most part, questions focused on people's own experiences and knowledge; people were not asked to report on their perceptions of other people's feelings, and only a limited number of questions were asked about how respondents thought things were in general in Boston.

This is a summary of some of the main points made in the full report of this research. As with any summary, the results are somewhat oversimplified as complexities are omitted in order to be concise. Readers are urged to read the full report, which also includes a detailed description of the survey methodology.

The survey dealt with people's satisfactions and problems in five major areas believed to be central to quality of life: the quality of the
neighborhood environment, housing, crime, fear of crime and police services, public schools, and work. The analysis focussed on comparing responses of black and white respondents. When differences in answers were found which were related to racial background, further analyses were undertaken to ascertain the extent to which differences should be attributed directly to race or to other ways the two groups differ. Data for Hispanics and Asians were not tabulated separately in this report because the sample sizes of those two groups were too small for statistical reliability. The following is a summary of the main findings on a topic-by-topic basis.

About the Population

The best current estimates are that blacks constitute about 22 percent of the Boston population. There has been some increase in the size of the black population in the last ten years, though overall the last decade generally has been one of ethnic stability of the population.

Although there are many ways in which the black and white populations differ, there are several differences which seem most likely to influence perspectives and thereby, responses and concerns. First, black households include families with children more often than white households. Almost half of the black households in Boston include minor children, while this is the case for only about 20 percent of the white households. Consequently, black children constitute much more than 22 percent of all minors in the city, while blacks constitute about 18 percent of all adults in the city.

Second, average incomes and levels of education are lower among black adults than they are among white adults.

Third, although blacks reside in most neighborhoods in Boston, the majority of the black population lives in two neighborhood areas, Roxbury and Dorchester-Mattapan.
Neighborhood Satisfaction

When asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the neighborhood in which they lived, blacks rated their satisfaction significantly lower than whites with respect to:

- parks and recreation facilities,
- the way property is maintained
- the kind and quality of nearby stores,
- access to good shopping areas,
- the way neighborhood residents get along,
- public transportation,
- the quality of nearby restaurants.

Whites were significantly less satisfied than blacks with the noise level in their neighborhood.

There was no significant difference between blacks and whites in their satisfaction with the way streets and sidewalks are maintained.

When responses were broken down by neighborhood area, Roxbury and Dorchester-Mattapan did not necessarily stand out in all these respects. However, the residents of Roxbury (but not residents of Dorchester-Mattapan) were significantly less satisfied than any other area with "the way property is kept up", with "access to good shopping areas", and with "the quality of nearby restaurants and places to go out". However, in addition, these problems were all cited in neighborhood areas in which few blacks reside.

Housing

When people were asked to rate the quality of their housing on various dimensions, it was found that blacks were significantly more likely than white respondents:
- to feel they had a serious maintenance problem with their housing.
to be dissatisfied with their housing,
- to feel they had experienced housing discrimination due to their race during the past five years.

There were no black/white differences in the rate of:
- feeling that housing was too small for family needs,
- feeling that the cost of housing was too high,
- feeling discriminated against with respect to access to housing for all reasons combined.

It is worth noting that, on average, both black and whites rated the condition of their housing significantly better in 1981 than they did in 1970. In addition, during that same period there was a significant improvement among both groups in their perception of the fairness of the cost of their housing.

Finally, whites with incomes over $15,000 reported a higher level of housing satisfaction than whites with lower incomes. However, blacks with incomes over $15,000 were no more satisfied with their housing than blacks or whites with lower incomes.

Crime, Fear of Crime and Police Services

Compared to whites, blacks were significantly:
- more likely to report being burglary victim during the preceding year,
- less likely to say they felt safe alone on their neighborhood streets during the day or at night,
- more likely to rate robbery a "serious problem",
- less likely to say they think police respond quickly to calls for help,
less likely to rate the way police treat neighborhood residents and the overall quality of police service as "good".

White respondents were significantly more likely than black respondents:
- to say they had a good chance of being beaten up or assaulted during the course of a year,
- to cite crime as the major problem in Boston.

There were no differences between black and white responses with respect to their overall rating of burglary as a problem.

Perceived freedom of movement was related to race in that whites were most likely to say they were afraid to go into Roxbury and Dorchester while blacks said they feared going to South Boston and Charlestown. However, there was no difference in the way blacks and whites said they felt about being into crowds or visiting downtown Boston.

Finally fear had not increased in Boston. The ratings of how safe people felt alone on their neighborhood streets at night were no different in 1981 for either blacks or whites than they were in 1970.

**Boston Public Schools**

Black respondents were more likely than white respondents:
- to have school-aged children,
- to use the public schools if they had school-aged children
- to rate the job the public high schools do in preparing students for jobs as "poor",
- to cite improved educational opportunities as one result of busing.
Whites were significantly more likely than blacks:
- to use non-public schools,
- to rate the overall quality of public schools as "poor",
- to be able to cite no positive effects of the busing program,
- to cite increased fear of violence in the schools as a negative effect of busing,
- to cite reduced quality of education as a negative effect of busing,
- to cite the changed racial composition of the public schools as a negative effect of busing.

There were no significant differences between white and black respondents with respect to:
- their generally negative ratings of the quality of public high school preparation for college,
- the rate at which they cited improved race relations as a positive effect of busing,
- the rate at which they cited increased racial tension as a negative effect of busing,
- the rate at which they cited leaving the home neighborhood as a negative part of busing.

In addition, among both groups, the perception that schools had become worse over the last ten years was much more common than the perception that they had been improved, though blacks were more likely than whites to report some sense of improvement. When 1981 ratings of public schools were compared with the same ratings in 1970, there was an extreme drop apparent in the evaluations by white respondents. Black ratings were no better and no worse; but their ratings in 1970 were extremely low compared to those of whites. The
overall result of a decade of change has been a convergence of black and white ratings of Boston public schools that reflect a low evaluation of the educational opportunities available there.

Work

Respondents were asked questions regarding their job satisfaction, their employment status and experience with what they perceived to be job discrimination. The answers showed that blacks significantly more than whites:

- said that, given their training and skills, they should have a better job,
- said that they were dissatisfied with their current jobs,
- classified themselves as being unemployed or disabled,
- said they had suffered some form of job discrimination, either with respect to hiring or promotion, due to race in the past years.

There were no differences between black and white responses with respect to:

- saying that they had skills that they would like to use that they were not using on their job.
- saying that they wanted to have a job but could not get one,
- the rate at which they said they experienced job discrimination due to age, sex or race.

A major pattern that emerged from the data was that education, more than race, predicted problems with getting a job. Those who had not finished high school were much more likely than those with more education to be unable to get a job if they wanted to. Within education groups, there were not significant differences between blacks and whites in their success in getting jobs.
Black and white differences in measures related to feelings about jobs were the most significant race-related differences in this section. Differences between black and white responses were most apparent for males, for those thirty to fifty years of age and for those who had attended college.

**Ratings of Facilities and Opportunities**

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with a variety of aspects of life in the Boston area thought to be critical to quality of life. Of the eight questions asked, blacks reported significantly less satisfaction on seven:
- the quality of medical facilities,
- job opportunities,
- cost and quality of housing,
- outdoor recreation opportunities,
- cultural activities,
- restaurants and clubs,
- educational opportunities.

The only item on the list for which there was no significant difference was the rating of race relations in Boston. Of all the items in the list, for both groups, the quality of race relations and the cost and quality of available housing were the two aspects of life with which they were least satisfied.

**Conclusion**

The preceding data show clearly that when blacks and whites differed, it was most likely that blacks reported more problems. Yet, overall, there was perhaps a surprising amount of convergence in the problems and concerns expressed by the two groups. The commonality of interests stands out clearly. For example:
1. Concerns about the cost and size of housing occurred at almost equal rates among blacks and whites.

2. Black and white respondents felt basically the same way about the Boston public schools. Although there were some differences in the problem areas singled out by the two groups, for the most part their concerns were quite similar. The main differences of importance were that the white ratings had declined markedly in the last decade, while black ratings had remained uniformly low. In addition, black families were much more reliant on the public schools than white families with children in Boston.

3. Concerns about crime were prevalent among both blacks and whites. Blacks over 30 generally reported the highest level of fear and concern about crime. However, efforts at crime and fear reduction are salient to both blacks and whites.

4. Perceptions of discrimination in jobs and in housing were reported as often by white respondents as by black respondents. The difference lay in the fact that blacks thought they were discriminated against because of their race. While occasionally, whites also thought their race or ethnic background was the source of discrimination, sex and age (with respect to work), being students, and having children and being on welfare (with respect to housing) were more often cited as problems by whites. However, fair housing and employment practices are of nearly equal relevance to both blacks and whites.

5. Although blacks reported more job dissatisfaction than whites, reports of job dissatisfaction were prevalent among both groups. Moreover, job dissatisfaction appeared to increase with education
among both groups. The problem of improving the match between people's skills and their jobs clearly cuts across racial lines.

6. For both blacks and whites, the problems of getting a job without a high school diploma were very acute. While only about five percent of blacks or whites in Boston with a high school diploma said they could not find a job, the rate was 20 percent for those lacking a high school education, regardless of race.

There were problem areas where racial differences and concerns were more apparent. For example, dissatisfaction with shopping and amenities available in the neighborhood was distinctively apparent among Roxbury residents. Blacks, more than whites, reported problems with the physical condition of their housing. Blacks reported significantly less positive perceptions of police services than whites. However, in each of these cases, there were numerous whites who shared the same concerns. Efforts to address these problem areas need not necessarily be defined in racial terms.

Out of this, when one is looking at factors that affect people's lives, there is ample basis for defining problems and developing programs in ways that are not racially divisive. However, one of the most important challenges is to create an environment that fosters mutual trust so that the various groups in Boston gain an enhanced perception that they can receive a fair share of the efforts to improve the quality of life in Boston.