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City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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Study of

RACIAL AND ETHNIC RELATIONS IN PORTLAND

City Club of Portland

September 1991

Description of Study

I. Introduction

Six individual reports on *Racial and Ethnic Relations in Portland* have been prepared for presentation to City Club members in the coming months. The reports are the work of six subcommittees and individually address racial and ethnic relations in: 1.) social associations and citizen participation; 2.) health and welfare; 3.) law enforcement and the administration of justice; 4.) housing; 5.) education; and 6.) employment. The six separate documents are available at the City Club office.

The 1991 City Club reports on *Racial and Ethnic Relations in Portland* are not intended to be studies of minority groups. Rather, the subcommittees have examined the ways in which the institutions, programs, attitudes, and behaviors of the majority community in Portland affects majority-minority relations and may influence the lives, aspirations, and opportunities available to members of minority groups.

The climate of racial and ethnic relations in Portland is important because of fundamental issues of fairness and justice. It is also a significant concern because the composition of Portland's population is changing—and will continue to change at an accelerating rate. In the coming decade, the demography of Oregon will reflect significant in-migration from the Asia-Pacific region and Latin America.

The growing minority group share of Oregon's future workforce will parallel national trends. The federal "Workforce 2000" study has projected that, for the entire United States, members of minority groups will constitute 50 percent of new workers in the 1990's. Among new women entering the U.S. workforce, 29 of every 100 are expected to be African-American, Asian, Hispanic or Native American. The number of ethnic minorities consuming education, goods, services and information will also grow. The Population Research and Census Center at Portland State University now projects an increase in the percentage of minority children in Oregon from 11.8% in 1990 to 14.1% in 2000 and 16.8% by 2010.

The charge to the six subcommittees was to evaluate conditions in the Portland area since the publication of the 1968 City Club report, *Problems of Racial Justice in Portland*. Early in the subcommittees' work, it became apparent that although many efforts have been made in Portland to address the issues raised in 1968, and laws allowing racial discrimination no longer exist, many problems remain. But it was also apparent that, twenty years later, the problems manifest themselves in somewhat different ways.

A key difference between the 1968 report and this one is the inclusion of data and discussion relating not only to African-Americans but also to Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans. In addition to the five study areas pursued in 1968, the reports now include a study of racial and ethnic relations in social associations and citizen participation in local government. The 1991 reports address the following issues:

✓ **Social Associations/Citizens Participation**—participation of racial and ethnic minorities in Portland local government, including citizen advisory groups, neighborhood coalitions and elected officials; minority memberships and participation on the governing boards of directors of private and nonprofit community organi-

zations; the role and effectiveness of the Metropolitan Human Relations Commission in addressing racial and ethnic relations issues.

✓ **Public Welfare and Health**—racial and ethnic minority access to the major income maintenance programs administered by the Oregon Department of Human Resources, health care provided to minority patients through the Medicaid program and community-based agencies;

✓ **Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice**—racial and ethnic representation among employees at all levels, employee training on issues of cultural sensitivity, law enforcement's response to hate crimes, community policing, the citizen complaint process;

✓ **Housing**—racial and ethnic discrimination or restrictive policies affecting minorities' access to housing, neighborhood improvement and urban renewal programs, low-income and public housing supply and distribution, cultural barriers that limit access to housing by minority citizens;

Education—racial and ethnic isolation in the schools, minority enrollment and staffing in the Portland Public Schools and in public higher education, graduation and dropout rates among minority students, integration into the curriculum of programs dealing with minority issues, differential expectations of ethnic students;

✓ **Employment**—hiring of minority employees by public and private employers, including governments, schools, major industries, and professions, minority membership in unions, recruitment, promotion, and retention among minority employees;

Inevitably, these reports represent an artificial separation of the issues and common themes are shared among them: the linkage between poverty and racism; the impact of cultural insensitivity; the complacency of the majority community; the problems in gaining adequate education and economic independence; and the impact of crime throughout this community.

Conclusions and recommendations are presented in each of the Subcommittee reports.

II. Background

A. Oregon's History of Racial and Ethnic Relations

Oregon's history includes events which demonstrate significant racial intolerance:

- Exclusion laws were passed to keep African-Americans from settling in the Oregon Territory. The laws were reaffirmed at statehood and were not repealed until the 1920's.
- Although admitted to the Union as a free (rather than a slave) state, the Oregon constitution denied the right to vote to Chinese and Native American residents.
- During World War II, there was general support for the confinement in concentration camps of virtually all of the state's Japanese-American citizens.

- African-Americans, contributing to the war effort in Portland's ship yards during World War II, faced segregated restaurants and public accommodations.

On the other hand, in the past 20 years, Portland area citizens have demonstrated an openness and commitment to understanding the value of racial and ethnic diversity and increasing leadership opportunities for minority citizens.

- In the late 1970's a racially integrated community coalition advocating school desegregation pushed the Portland School Board into an intensive study which culminated in the 1980 adoption of the *Comprehensive Desegregation Plan*. The plan ended mandatory bussing of African-American students out of their neighborhoods and encouraged the development of magnet schools such as Jefferson High School and Sabin Elementary.
- African-Americans have been elected city and county-wide to serve on the Portland City Council and the Multnomah County Board of Commissioners.
- In the past two years, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Safety Action Team working with the Housing Authority of Portland and other social service agencies have empowered the largely minority residents of Columbia Villa to dramatically improve the safety and livability of their neighborhood.
- A Portland jury delivered a \$12.5 million verdict against white supremacist Tom Metzger for recruiting and inciting racial violence in the murder of Mulugeta Seraw, an Ethiopian immigrant.

The brutal murder of Seraw reminds us all that racially-motivated crimes do occur in Portland, just as they do in larger cities with well-publicized histories of racial and ethnic tension. The fact that members of a fringe group were involved in this case has led some to discount this incident as a misleading indicator of race relations. However, the Seraw tragedy has been followed by an escalation in the number of hate crimes in Portland. Widespread undertones of racial animosity also were exposed by the controversy over the naming of Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard.

B. Prior City Club Studies

The City Club has examined race relations in the City of Portland three times in the past. A 1945 report entitled *The Negro in Portland* addressed "the treatment of the Negro in the social and economic life of the city." The study committee noted that the African-American population in the Portland area had grown rapidly between 1941 and 1944, from 1,900 to approximately 18,000 individuals. The study's conclusions cited overt discrimination against African Americans in restaurants, hotels, access to home ownership and rental housing, hospitals, insurance, employment, and trade union membership. The report also found that there was "a tendency on the part of our present city authorities to minimize the present racial situation."

In 1955, a study was authorized to determine what progress had been made in race relations. *The Negro in Portland: A Progress Report 1945-1957*, found Portland's African-American population decreased to 11,000 (3 percent). Regarding the issues of housing, public accommodation, economic opportunities, insurance and credit, social opportunities, education, religion, and the press, radio and television, the report found that "Negroes, as a general rule, are not accepted on equal terms by

the Portland white community." Consistent with the 1945 report, the 1957 update found "City authorities of Portland noticeably unconcerned with the problems faced by Negroes and other minority peoples."

The 1968 Report on *Problems of Racial Justice in Portland* was initiated by the City Club in response to racial unrest throughout the country and to the publication of the nationwide study of racial relations by the Kerner Commission, officially known as the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. As the Kerner Commission concluded nationally, the City Club's 1968 report found that many of the problems attributable to racial discrimination were actually exacerbated by the small size of the African-American community in Portland, which then numbered about 16,000 people. The committee concluded:

"it is relatively easy for the white community to push from its collective conscience the group, its plight, and its problems.

this community had permitted to exist degrees of discrimination which actually exceed, in some forms, discrimination in other cities with more dramatic ghetto problems."¹

The City Club found that while the "deficiencies and grievances" in Portland were different in scale from those in Watts, Newark or Detroit, they had the same roots and demanded the same urgent and immediate attention. The report cited discrimination and deficiencies in police attitudes and behavior, unemployment, the administration of justice, education, welfare and health, and housing.²

Although the subject of participation by minority groups in social and civic organizations was not specifically studied, the 1968 Committee identified "the neglect of citizen involvement in and with government to address problems which directly affect their lives and their futures" as a common denominator in all problem areas. This was described as being especially detrimental to effective communication between members of the African-American and Caucasian communities.

Study Charge to the 1989-91 Subcommittees

The study charge, approved in July, 1988, proposed a 20-year update of the 1968 City Club report in order to evaluate progress toward equality since 1968. Between 1968 and 1990, both the numbers of minorities in Portland and the diversity within each ethnic group have increased. For example, the Asian community now includes people of Hmong, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Pacific Islander heritage. The Hispanic community includes many recent immigrants from Mexico, and Central America in addition to earlier immigrants from South America and Puerto Rico. Therefore the subcommittees were asked to include data and discussion relating to Asians, Hispanics and Native Americans.

Because this study focuses on the impact of the majority community on minority groups, the subcommittees have not dealt explicitly with relations between or among minority communities.

1. Problems of Racial Justice in Portland, 1968, The City Club of Portland, p 8.

2. Ibid, p 92.

While this study focuses primarily on the City of Portland, some data and discussion related to the larger metropolitan area have been included where they will clarify an issue or contribute to the analysis.

III. The Language of the Reports

The subcommittees are aware that there are many strong feelings about the usage of various names for racial and ethnic groups. The terms "white" and "Caucasian" are both used in these reports to refer to Portland's majority population. "African-American" is used here to refer to the minority community also termed "black" and which was termed "Negro" in the past. In these reports, "Asian" refers to people whose origins are in East, South, or Southeast Asia or the Pacific Islands. The term "Hispanic" refers to people of Spanish origin or surname, or otherwise self-reported, regardless of race. Although not a racial group, Hispanics are important to any discussion of ethnic minority groups in Oregon. "Native American" includes American Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos (Inuits).

In interviews and research, the subcommittees have repeatedly heard the usage of many sensitive, often controversial, terms related to racial and ethnic relations. For example, the subcommittees carefully considered possible concerns caused by the word "minority," traditionally used as an adjective, but often used in these reports as a noun. "Cultural insensitivity" is a troublesome term. In these reports, it is used to refer to behavior which does not respect differences in culture or cultural values, regardless of whether the behavior is intentional or unconscious.

On other occasions, witnesses before the subcommittees alluded to the impact of "perceptions of discrimination" on minority individuals and groups. Witnesses frequently testified that the impact on a minority individual of an act that is perceived to be discriminatory will be negative regardless of whether the act is intended or unintended.

The Committees were frequently reminded of the hazards of stereotyping and of generalizing about individuals by ethnicity, race, or economic status. Issues and concerns of importance to individuals within each ethnic group vary enormously, and these differences are increasing with the economic and social diversification within racial and ethnic communities. Although members of minority groups served on the Committees and although there were many witnesses from minority groups, it was not assumed that any single individual was in a position to speak for an entire minority group, just as no single Caucasian can speak for, or represent, the majority community in Portland.

IV. Demographic Data

Demographic information on racial and ethnic minorities in Portland has not been consistently maintained. Between 1970 and 1990, data collection was relatively consistent only for the African-American community.

The subcommittees have found that the absence of statistical information on racial and ethnic participation in public and private organizations is a barrier to obtaining a true picture of the participation by minority groups in the majority-

dominated institutions of this community. There are many arguments for and against maintaining more complete records on participation by members of racial and ethnic groups in these organizations. Those who oppose the collection of statistics argue that it may encourage the use of quotas and that data can be manipulated in ways that will exclude individuals from full participation. Others argue that the small size of minority groups in Portland would make statistics misleading.

Advocates of improved data collection assert that the failure to keep records makes it too easy to follow exclusionary practices. Maintaining data means there is proof of inclusion: "What gets counted gets done." Particularly because of the small number of minorities in Portland, it is argued, better statistical data could ensure that they are consistently represented in proportion to their numbers.

With the 1990 census, the U.S. Census Bureau has moved closer to collecting consistent data on racial and ethnic groups. However, census figures continue to be based primarily on self-identification. Some people choose not to identify themselves as belonging to a racial or ethnic group and will list themselves in the "other" category on census forms. In the 1970 U. S. Census, data were collected specifically for Caucasians, African-Americans and Native Americans and Asians. There was no racial category for Hispanics, and Native Americans were not asked to identify themselves by tribe, an omission which is believed to have lower reporting by Native Americans. In cases where individuals did not identify their race, the census collector used the father's ethnic status as a guide. In 1980, the census workers used the mother's ethnic status to determine ethnicity.

Population by racial and ethnic group in the City of Portland is shown in Table 1 for three census decades (1970, 1980, and 1990). Population and other demographic data as it pertains to the topic are presented in each of the six reports.

Table 1
City of Portland

	1970	1980	1990
Total population	382,619	368,139	437,319
Caucasian	352,635	319,220	370,135
Caucasian %	92.2%	86.7%	84.6%
African-American	21,572	28,034	33,530
African-American %	5.6%	7.6%	7.7%
Native American	1,281	3,374	5,399
Native American %	0.3%	0.9%	1.2%
Asian	7,131	12,980	23,185
Asian %	1.9%	3.5%	5.3%
Other			5,070
Other %			1.2%
*Hispanic	6,442	7,541	13,874
*Hispanic %	1.7%	2.0%	3.2%

*Source: U.S. Census for 1970, 1980; 1990. Hispanics are not considered a racial group by the Census Bureau. Hispanic identity is asked secondarily and therefore numbers for Hispanic peoples are included in the totals for all other races.

The African-American community has traditionally resided in inner north and northeast Portland. The Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods reports in 1989 that African-Americans comprise 56.7% of inner north and northeast Portland residents.³ In addition, Asians, Hispanics, and Native Americans comprise 12.3% of residents in inner north and northeast making that part of the city the most racially and ethnically diverse of all Portland neighborhoods.

In closing, the six subcommittee reports comprising the *Study of Racial and Ethnic Relations in Portland*, deal with issues that now face Portland as a community and challenge all of us as individuals. These issues will become increasingly important as the City's population becomes more racially and ethnically diverse in the years ahead.

3. Northeast Workforce Center 1989 Fact Sheet, A Project of the Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods, Inc.