

Census: New decade, same divide in Northfield

By Jaci Smith

Because of their culture, language barriers and income disparity with Caucasians and other races, Hispanics in Northfield tend to live in neighborhoods occupied by their own race.

That's what the 2010 Census numbers say about integration in Northfield and Dundas.

Using a mathematical formula, the Northfield News compared the percentages of Hispanics versus non-Hispanics — the city's largest minority group — in the 11 Census block groups that make up most of our two cities. A block group is roughly the size of a typical neighborhood.

What we found is that Northfield and Dundas' minority populations are fairly segregated from the rest of the community. More than half of the Hispanics in Northfield and Dundas — 51 percent — would have to move to a new neighborhood to integrate into our communities. A percentage closer to 100 means the community is more segregated; closer to zero means it's less so.

The census findings are bittersweet for Jorge Zuccolotto, who lives in the



Viking Terrace manufactured home park on the city's northwest side — occupied by mostly Hispanic families — not only because he enjoys the camaraderie of his own race, but also because he can't afford to buy a house anywhere else.

"It's a comfort level," said Zuccolotto, who is the boys high school coach and who works full-time at Carson Buildings in Northfield. "It's not only there, it's in the high school as well. The Latinos there feel secure when they are with the people they know."

Zuccolotto has been in Northfield for 11 years. He said that in the apartment he lived in for 10

of those years, he really never talked to anyone. And certainly nobody in the mostly white complex reached out to talk to him.

"It's better than it used to be seven or eight years ago," he said. "I think the language barrier plays a big part."

Zuccolotto said that it's also tough to buy a house in Northfield because Latinos don't make as much money. That, he says, plays a part in Hispanic families and their decisions where to live.

Census numbers show what Zuccolotto and other Hispanics have been feeling for years. According to the American Community Survey,

the median household income in Northfield is \$63,810. When race is introduced, the difference becomes stark: The Caucasian household median is \$66,505, the Hispanic median is slightly more than half that, \$34,602.

"It's hard to save," Zuccolotto said. "It's not in the picture. I see myself there (Viking Terrace) for five to 10 more years."

Michele Merxbauer, the head of the city's Housing and Redevelopment Authority, said that Viking Terrace and Florella's (on the other side of Hwy. 3 just east of Viking Terrace) give Hispanics the opportunity for ownership, which is another factor in neighborhood

choice.

“Manufactured homes give you your own space at an affordable rate,” she said. “For ownership opportunities, the manufactured home lots at Viking Terrace and Florella’s are the best places for Hispanics to buy.”

But Merxbauer says it goes deeper than just language and money. Culture, she says, plays a big part of the seemingly segregated neighborhoods.

“You can have multi-generational families living in close proximity,” she said. “Hispanic culture defines itself as having deep family values and these neighborhoods provide that opportunity.”

Nothing new

The census findings are not a new phenomenon, either. Using 2000 Census figures, Northfield and Dundas’ dissimilarity index varied little in a decade, coming in at

49 percent vs. 2010’s 51 percent.

As Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity, Dayna Clemment said she doesn’t have the luxury of picking and choosing where Habitat builds its homes. It builds where it can buy land it can afford.

Clemment said they have built homes for Hispanics in predominantly Caucasian neighborhoods — most recently in Dundas, Clemment said, although the Hispanic population in that community is growing as well — and they have built homes for Caucasian families in Hispanic neighborhoods. In both cases, the families have meshed well with their neighbors, she said.

Clemment said she could think of only one recent Habitat family that factored their ethnicity into the decision to accept a Habitat home. The family was Somali and

the property selected for them was in Lonsdale. They opted to forego the new home in order to stay closer to other Somali families in the region.

“They didn’t want to be the first Somali family in Lonsdale,” Clemment said. “It wasn’t that Lonsdale’s not a great community, they just wanted to stay where their community was.”

The most segregated block group in Northfield is a narrow geographical swath that contains Viking Terrace mobile home park, with the city line as the boundary to the north and Fifth Street as the southern boundary. Nearly 50 percent of Northfield and Dundas’ Hispanics live in that neighborhood, compared to just 2 percent of the non-Hispanic population. The most integrated neighborhood — it has exactly the same proportion of Hispanics and

non-Hispanics in relation to the total population — is just east of St. Olaf, bounded on the east by Water Street and the west by Plum Street, and between Greenvale and Fifth on the northern and southern edges.

The only other larger city in Rice County fares better in the dissimilarity index. Faribault is far more integrated a community than Northfield, for both the black and the Hispanic communities. About a third of each of those populations would have to move to further integrate that community.

And until there is less disparity in pay and some of the language barriers are removed, things won’t change quickly in Northfield.

“People feel safe clustering in their own neighborhoods,” Zuccolotto said. “There, everybody knows everybody else. We’re all very close.”