

# Fostering Inclusion: Whose Problem? Which Problem?

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Asking “what would it take” — about transforming housing segregation or any other challenge — assumes some level of agreement that a given social condition is, in fact, a problem that needs to be solved.<sup>1</sup> But in America, we have never been able to take that for granted, not about most of our big challenges, not even about the things that seem profoundly inconsistent with core American values of fairness and equal opportunity. The persistence of stark race and class segregation in housing is one of those great inconsistencies and one of the nation’s most stubborn problems. It is also one of the central mechanisms reproducing inequality, over years and even generations. But attention to growing inequality in America has not — yet — mobilized significant new attention or commitment to addressing segregation. Why is that?

As a country, we have shown a very particular indecision and impasse when it comes to treating housing segregation as a problem and acting on it in a meaningful way. Put plainly, changing segregation is a cause with few champions.

The political Left remains ambivalent about it: it wonders, first, whether it is urgent to address segregation *per se* as part of tackling crime, school failure, job and health disparities, and other problems that segregation contributes to; second, whether such effort comes at an unacceptable cost to other efforts that make demands on precious and scarce public attention, political capital, and funding; third, whether segregation can be tackled in ways that do not stigmatize those most affected (poor people of color in particular); and, finally, even whether hoped-for reforms can shift big, entrenched patterns affecting millions of people. As such, on the Left, the seemingly natural allies for an agenda to tackle inequality by addressing segregation have mixed feelings about both the problem and at least some of the solutions: Are the solutions legitimate — consistent with our values, laws, and political traditions — and if so, could they actually work?

The political Right, on the other hand, has been generally hostile to the idea that segregation is a problem, even if most Americans, on both Left and Right, agree

that discrimination in the housing market is not only illegal but morally wrong.<sup>2</sup> Of those on the Right who do agree that segregation itself is a problem, many are unconvinced that it warrants government intervention — let alone that such intervention could succeed. Yet Richard Rothstein’s encyclopedic new book, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, shows how early and how effectively the government built segregation into the fabric of urban and suburban development, virtually ensuring America’s gaping and growing racial wealth gap.<sup>3</sup> Libertarian and other conservative commentators are suggesting that Rothstein’s analysis is one more reminder that government cannot be trusted with even the most well-intended “social engineering” to undo wrongs. The Right generally recommends that change agents focus on two things. The first is empowering individuals to make different choices. This, however, is a challenging prescription when so many in the housing market have such limited choices available to them. Second, the Right advocates freeing individuals from excessive government regulation. Yet it seems naïve to argue that merely lifting regulations will allow the free market to somehow correct housing segregation when that market has itself been shaped, as Rothstein and others have shown exhaustively, by decades of regulations that have exacerbated segregation; when it comes to regulatory reform, in other words, the devil is in the details.

These are some of the reasons that we, as a country, “rediscover” segregation and its enormous human costs every decade or so, only to conclude that it is too intractable or questionable to tackle with serious resolve. This rediscovering happened after the civil unrest in Los Angeles in 1992, again after Hurricane Katrina put geographically concentrated black poverty and public outrage squarely on TV screens nationwide in 2005, and again as political and media attention to extreme inequality has grown in recent years.

Among scholars and opinion leaders, the influential work of economist Raj Chetty and colleagues at the Equality of Opportunity Project points to segregation as a key barrier to economic mobility in America — with effects that vary sharply between more and less segregated regions of the country.<sup>4</sup> This latest-generation work, which has garnered bipartisan interest in multiple regions of the country, supports earlier conclusions, by sociologists Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton in *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* and by others, that housing segregation by race and income is, in fact, one of the lynchpins of American inequality.<sup>5</sup> Along with mass incarceration, extreme and persistent segregation in housing and communities is one of the structural patterns that differentiates America from other wealthy nations (though Europe faces serious and growing segregation of immigrant ethnic minorities).

Segregated housing patterns are durable and enduring in part because they are sustained by forces that many view as legitimate and even unavoidable, if unfortunate. These patterns have been called out explicitly at least since lawyer and planning professor Charles Abrams's 1955 book, *Forbidden Neighbors: A Study of Prejudice in Housing*, and by national policymakers since the landmark Kerner Commission report on the riots that tore apart American cities fifty years ago.<sup>6</sup> For now, there are no signs that we as a people are serious about changing segregation.

In this brief foreword, I'd like to offer a specific reading of the editors' very thoughtful essay, "Fostering Inclusion in American Neighborhoods," which introduces this volume, and the larger project of which it is a part. I work at a philanthropic foundation long committed to expanding knowledge about, and promoting solutions to, inequality, including solutions that center on housing and specifically housing segregation. I have also pursued these aims over several stints in federal government service and tackled them as a community planner at the local level. Finally, some seventeen years ago, when I was a researcher and educator, I organized a symposium and collection of papers — led by the Harvard Civil Rights Project and cosponsored by the Joint Center for Housing Studies and the Brookings Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program — focused on segregation, its causes and consequences, and "what it would take" to effect real change at scale. That symposium produced an edited volume, *The Geography of Opportunity: Race and Housing Choice in Metropolitan America*.<sup>7</sup> With this background, I want to briefly look back — asking what has or has not changed in our understanding of the problems and potential solutions over the past two decades — and also look forward.

## **STARTING POINTS**

The 2001 symposium had several points of departure, and revisiting them now offers some perspective on how our national mood, key attention-getting trends, political leadership, housing markets and perceived housing problems, and more have evolved since then. One starting point was the sharply increased attention, in the late 1990s, to America's dominant pattern of urban sprawl and the idea of pursuing more sustainable or "smart growth" alternatives. The interest in this issue sparked healthy debate, though mainly among scholars, planners and allied professionals, about the tradeoffs between environmental aims and values of equity, including housing affordability. On the issue of sprawl, just like segregation, there was and still is a big gap between the scholarly focus on defining the problem and its consequences — with great care and exhaustive data — and the wider public conversation, in which the issue may or may not be considered a significant problem that needs to be solved. On a related point, in the 1990s, the environmental justice movement began to draw attention to spatial inequality, focusing on the highly disproportionate exposure of poor communities of color to toxins and other environmental risks. Segregated and limited housing choices

are directly implicated in that persistent, costly, and unjust exposure. Should the country view reducing segregation as part of a vital environmental health agenda? Or should we focus entirely on reducing disparities in exposure without changing the housing choices available to everyone?

Advancing that debate, and similar debates about education and crime risks, seemed especially important in light of evidence that economic inequality was increasing sharply in America, whether measured in terms of wealth, income, or other dimensions. We wondered about more environmentally sustainable but increasingly unaffordable communities pulling away from distressed, built-up and — in some cases — highly polluted places.

Other starting points arose from even more tectonic, large-scale demographic changes. A national Initiative on Race, launched by President Clinton in 1997, produced the landmark National Research Council volume, *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences*, with empirical analysis and discussion of these tectonic changes and of the history of the “color line” in America’s culture, politics, and economy.<sup>8</sup> The headlines are as important now as they were two decades ago. For example, much of the wealthy world has modest to zero population growth, largely because of falling birth rates, but America is different. We are a large and still-growing nation, thanks mainly to immigration, which is, in turn, driving greater racial and ethnic diversity. In the 1990s, for example, the populations of most American cities would have shrunk if not for immigration.<sup>9</sup> Urban vitality is bound up with growing diversity, so understanding that diversity and “getting it right” is crucial for all of us.

What is more, we saw that as of the 2000 census, an estimated one-third of the built environment needed to accommodate population growth in America over the subsequent generation did not yet exist and would therefore need to be built in the years to come. This finding underscored the huge stakes associated with *how* we grow, particularly the prospects for more inclusionary, less segregated and unequal growth. It also underlined the fact that our debates about persistent segregation cannot be limited to public housing in inner cities or to other long-established fixtures of our current spatial footprint. We always need to be asking about what’s next, too — about the course of new development, both infill and at the edges of urban regions. And of course, we need to pay attention to how these development trends influence each other and influence our politics and sense of what’s possible.

To sum up, in 2001, for the intersecting reasons outlined above, we asked: Can an increasingly diverse nation hope to deal with growing economic inequality if the dominant growth model “on the ground” is one of persistent segregation by race and income? Do the parts of that equation add up?

By comparison, the introductory chapter for this volume centers more squarely on the growth of inequality per se and the much greater political and cultural salience of the issue now versus 15 to 20 years ago. That salience is encouraging. And so is the recognition that we have generally used the racial and economic make-up of neighborhoods and localities as a proxy, sometimes a weak one, for access to opportunity. Years on from the extensively researched Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment, which showed neighborhood poverty rates to be a limited proxy for access to opportunity, and based on significant work over the last two decades to map “opportunity” much more meaningfully for many types of families, the editors of this volume rightly emphasize, in their introduction, that the real goal should not be a particular race or class make-up in every community but “universal access to high-opportunity neighborhoods.” Our concern about segregation — in simple terms, our wish for a more balanced make-up than that of the status quo — follows logically from that need to expand access.

In terms of local trends, as the chapters in this volume reflect, researchers, the media and the public are even more aware now than after the economic boom of the late 1990s that “cities are back.” Major cities that still showed substantial decline a decade or more ago — New Orleans and large sections of Detroit, for example — have since then seen their population trends reverse and have attracted enormous investment, especially over the course of recovery from the Great Recession. Housing prices are up along with the job economy in those and other revitalizing cities. So, a debate about the drivers of segregation and responses to it today appropriately gives greater weight than did earlier discussions to the power of urban redevelopment to either exacerbate or alleviate segregation — and hence to the need for “development without displacement,” as advocates in revitalizing cities frame the need. Increasingly, major media coverage and not just scholarly work recognizes that these pressures are structural, large in scale, and stubbornly reinforced by local land-use and tax policy and other institutional forces — not by a single business cycle or isolated local market boom.<sup>10</sup>

The sense of displacement, of being pushed out, is much sharper now than in 2001. But in point of fact, the pattern is nothing new, and some observers forecasted this predicament long ago, linking it to the forces driving a new urban vitality after decades of decline. For example, in *Dual City: Restructuring New York*, John H. Mollenkopf and Manuel Castells showed that New York’s comeback from the low point of the bankruptcy crisis of the 1970s had made the city a global magnet for investment capital and high-income occupations, sharply inflating land values and housing prices.<sup>11</sup> Over the 1980s, they reported, poverty had been pushed outward, “like a ring donut,” from neighborhoods in the city’s core to its outer boroughs as well as its more racially diverse, fiscally vulnerable inner suburbs. The subsequent decades have sustained and accelerated those trends, with New York City and surrounding cities and suburbs

showing the region to be one of the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. What Detroit and other cities are seeing and debating now, New York, Boston and other “comeback cities” experienced a couple of decades earlier. And again, the pressures driving both prosperity and inequality are structural, not artifacts of one business cycle. In fact, these trends were barely interrupted by the Great Recession.

On a final comparative note, having thus far emphasized those durable, long-run structural trends, I want to highlight more recent developments as well. In addition to the growth of inequality, the introductory essay and the other chapters in this volume reflect the enormous impacts of the foreclosure crisis, which we had only dimly foreshadowed in the 2005 book’s chapter on “The Dual Mortgage Market: The Persistence of Discrimination in Mortgage Lending,” by William C. Apgar and Allegra Calder.<sup>12</sup> Beyond a huge loss of housing wealth and greater regulation in the mortgage market, there is another important legacy of the crisis, and it is a healthy one. We are much more conscious now than in the real estate boom of the early 2000s of how profoundly the workings of the real estate industry, and its rapid evolution thanks to information technology, can hurt us. In that vein, one of the most ground-breaking sections in this book focuses on the present and future of housing searches in an era of online platform apps, algorithms, and technology-mediated screening of many kinds. These essays — and the symposium session where they were first presented — put housing scholars in direct exchange with senior analysts and strategists from the online real estate search companies that now dominate the housing marketplace. Moreover, with microtargeted advertising, Facebook and other major social media companies, not Zillow or others in real estate, play an increasingly important but still poorly understood role in shaping the marketplace and how the demographic make-up of communities evolves over time. Housing searches were different and our understanding of them much more limited fifteen years ago, prior to the foreclosure crisis and the rapid rise of social media and mobile apps in many industries.

## **THE SOLUTION SET AND THE MISSING STORY**

If the unequal housing marketplace has evolved — dramatically in some ways — over the past fifteen-plus years, our sense of the best available levers for changing segregation has not. Nor has our story about why acting on segregation is both legitimate and urgent, big and structural but also doable and achievable. To be fair, by some measures, our prescriptions today are not all that different from those championed by the open housing movement — the inheritors of the civil rights movement and the Kerner Commission’s warnings — in the early 1970s. This suggests at least three lessons over the long run.

The first is that we, as a country, lack will more than we lack imagination — let alone sophisticated analysis. I introduced this essay with some of the reasons that we, as a

nation, appear to lack that will. Building it depends on generating enough agreement that some condition is, in fact, a problem that needs to be solved *and* that the means of doing so are broadly supportable. When it comes to tackling housing segregation, we are not there yet on either count.

The second lesson is that we need new stories and ways to tell them. In recent memory, the very best case against segregation was made by a comedian, John Oliver, who in 2016 used his satirical cable news program *Last Week Tonight* to explain three extremely important things about how America works: first, how school and housing segregation directly enable each other; second, why they guarantee that America will reproduce stark inequalities from one generation to the next; and third, why these closely linked forms of segregation so effectively resist change.<sup>13</sup> In effect, in the context of such high, persistent, and stubbornly defended segregation, a popular comic ridiculed our claim that America *can* offer equal opportunity for all — and our resignation to the country never quite making good on the offer.

The third lesson over the long run is that beyond lacking a compelling story to motivate change, we sometimes lack perspective as well on where the leverage for change lies, on what exactly we need to solve for. Take the persistent tendency to conflate discrimination, which the framing chapter emphasizes, with segregation.

People in America continue to experience housing discrimination, which is illegal, and continue to under-report it. As we analyzed in detail in the 2005 book, such discrimination, while inconsistent with public opinion in America, is challenging to detect and enforce against. But the larger and less acknowledged point was and is the following: discrimination, whether conscious or unconscious, against particular kinds of consumers is less important as a driver of segregation than is the avoidance of certain neighborhoods or localities by those with the best housing options, especially whites and higher-skill, higher-income people of color.<sup>14</sup> This “self-steering” behavior has big social and fiscal costs, as scholars of segregation have pointed out for decades now. But it is not illegal. Moreover, as sociologist Camille Charles argued in her 2005 chapter on attitudes toward the racial make-up of neighborhoods, many of us balance what we think we owe our families with what we think might contribute, however modestly, to a fairer and more just society.<sup>15</sup> And many of us experience these values as frequently in conflict, especially when faced with the decision to move somewhere.

What does this mean? It means that laws against housing discrimination by realtors, lenders or others in the marketplace are important and should be enforced vigorously and fairly. But because of white avoidance and self-steering in particular, doing so would have limited effects on racial segregation. Because of growing income segregation, it would also have limited effects on the tendency of upper-income and

wealthy people to live apart from everyone else. At the risk of belaboring the point, though fighting illegal housing discrimination is important, as the contributors to this volume show, it is at least as important to directly expand housing options, especially for lower-income people of color, and to understand how people choose among the options available to them. The body of research in this volume represents a very healthy step in that direction.

## THE FOUR SEGREGATION DEBATES — AND WHAT COMES NEXT

Finally, and most broadly, this important volume encompasses an extraordinarily rich and in-depth update of what I think of as the four enduring debates about segregation: the “what” (the descriptive patterns or shape of the problem), the “why” (causes), the “so what” (consequences), and the “now what” (solutions). And thanks to big data, mobile broadband, a more visible inequality debate, and other developments, the volume offers a very contemporary and vital rethink of what’s possible, at least in concept, when it comes to change. In the language of our 2005 redux, the “now-what” solutions boil down to “curing” segregation (changing stubborn housing patterns) or “mitigating” it (making the patterns less socially costly, by shifting the relationship between where people live and the risks and resources they encounter).<sup>16</sup> Curing centers on household relocation and inclusionary housing development strategies. Mitigating centers on community reinvestment, connectivity, and expanding disadvantaged people’s access to what economist Frank Levy calls “equalizing institutions” — sometimes life-changing ones — beyond one’s segregated neighborhood.<sup>17</sup> Both kinds of solution, cure and mitigate, are legitimate and consistent with our values, laws, and best political traditions of working together to create a more level playing field in America — and both are also vital for practical reasons. No one approach will move the needle enough.

This new body of research and those solutions deserve an equally serious and committed story — a resonant narrative — joined to an advocacy and constituency-building effort that’s relevant in a changing, polarized, deeply unsettled American body politic. Without that narrative and that effort, we seem consigned, in practice, to continue rediscovering segregation and also to continue lamenting that it is just too hard — or worse yet, un-American — to undo.

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## Endnotes

- 1 On the important distinction between a social condition, even a serious and persistent one, and a "problem" that needs to be solved, and on how some conditions become problems, see political scientist John Kingdon's (1984) seminal analysis of what lands—or does not—on the agenda for policy makers' attention. Or, as Kingdon put it, "How does an idea's time come?" See also Baumgartner and Jones (1993).
- 2 See Briggs (2005c).
- 3 Rothstein (2017).
- 4 Chetty, Friedman, and Hendren (2018).
- 5 Massey and Denton (1993).
- 6 Abrams (1955); National Advisory Commission (1968).
- 7 Briggs (2005a).
- 8 Smelser, Wilson, and Mitchell (2001).
- 9 For review and discussion of these trends as we made sense of them at the turn of the millennium, see Briggs (2005b) and Pastor (2001).
- 10 See, for example, Badger (2017).
- 11 Mollenkopf and Castells (1991).
- 12 Apgar and Calder (2005).
- 13 Last Week Tonight (2016).
- 14 See, for example, Schelling (1971), Ellen (2000), and Sampson (2011).
- 15 Charles (2005).
- 16 Briggs (2005c).
- 17 Levy (1999).