

Consequences of Segregation for Children’s Opportunity and Wellbeing

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“Men and women of all races are born with the same range of abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neighborhood you live in — by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unseen forces playing upon the little infant, the child, and finally the man.”

— President Lyndon B. Johnson, Commencement Address at Howard University, June 4, 1965¹

As the child population becomes “majority-minority,” racial segregation remains high, income segregation among families with children increases, and the political and policy landscape undergoes momentous change, it is a particularly crucial time to consider the consequences of segregation for children’s opportunity and wellbeing. Not only is residential segregation more extreme for children than for adults, but the close links between residential and school segregation mean that children are often isolated from opportunity across multiple environments during the developmental period when neighborhood and school resources critically impact their wellbeing, opportunities, and life chances.

Beyond this reality of segmented opportunities lies a greater question — whether such separation and difference in the quality of children’s environments by race/income is morally or socially right. Segregation spatially isolates groups and limits social interaction, and, for children, this isolation occurs during the crucial period when racial attitudes are being formed. The degree of this separation challenges the values of unity and equal opportunity that we as a nation espouse, especially to the extent that

purposefully exclusionary policies contribute to high levels of residential segregation. Further, segregation reifies notions of difference and supremacy by making separation into a physical reality. As illustrated by the account of a young, black student in a wealthy Boston suburb who was bused into the inner-city after school because of the mistaken assumption that he must be a desegregation program participant rather than a resident of that suburb², segregation fosters powerful perceptions of who belongs where, who deserves “access.”

As the US becomes increasingly racially and ethnically diverse, particularly among the young, the harms of segregation will affect a growing share of the population. While children of color currently comprise about half of the child population, this share is projected to rise to over 60 percent by 2050, with particularly strong growth of the Hispanic child population.

Suburban/urban demographic shifts present both new challenges and opportunities as families of color continue to move to the suburbs. Further, a changed political landscape arguably favors a host of policy changes that could exacerbate segregation. New policy directions regarding taxes and entitlements, fair housing, and school choice, to name a few, all have great potential to exacerbate economic and racial/ethnic segregation, making this an especially significant moment to understand the extent and costs of segregation for children.

CHILDREN MORE SEGREGATED THAN ADULTS; INCOME SEGREGATION RISING FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

For every major racial/ethnic group, levels of residential segregation from whites are higher for children than they are for adults.³ Children are also more economically segregated than adults, but income alone does not explain their high levels of racial/ethnic segregation. Even among poor children (those below the federal poverty line), segregation indices for all major racial/ethnic groups, relative to poor white children, are extremely high — in fact, substantially higher than the rates for children of all incomes.

Over the past few decades, increases in household income segregation have occurred predominantly among families with children, whose segregation levels are about twice as high as those of childless families. Owens finds that rising residential income segregation for families with children is largely related to increases in income inequality and the structure of school options, as characterized by school district boundaries and fragmentation. Upper-income families with children, benefiting from rising incomes, have been able to buy into more exclusive neighborhoods, further separating themselves from lower-income households.⁴

This segregative behavior is a main mechanism by which higher-income families with children are actively separating themselves. Many privileged families choose to live in exclusionary communities by race, income, or both, largely by seeking high-performing school districts, sometimes using test scores or school racial composition as a proxy for school quality. This separation is facilitated by zoning that excludes housing types affordable to lower-income families, who are disproportionately black and Hispanic. Upper-income families who choose to live in cities often sequester themselves in exclusive neighborhoods where schools reflect neighborhood demographics, or they send children to private or exam schools, leaving lower-income black and Hispanic children in less advantaged neighborhoods and schools.

SEGREGATION IS ASSOCIATED WITH VASTLY DIFFERENT CHILD ENVIRONMENTS

Segregation is not benign. The neighborhoods where children live and grow are both separate and also greatly unequal along racial/ethnic lines in ways that have profound impacts on opportunities for healthy child development and wellbeing. The differences in neighborhood characteristics and opportunities between racial/ethnic groups are dramatic not just on average, but for large majorities of their populations.

For example, using neighborhood poverty rate as a proxy for neighborhood quality, we found that large shares of all black and Hispanic children live in higher-poverty neighborhoods than do the worst-off white children. We defined “worst-off white children” as the 25 percent who live in the highest-poverty neighborhoods for white children in each of the 100 largest US metropolitan areas.⁵ On average, about 76 percent of black children and 69 percent of Hispanic children live in neighborhoods with poverty rates higher than those found in the neighborhoods of the worst-off white children. These differences remain even after taking children’s own poverty status into account. About 74 percent of poor black children and 60 percent of poor Hispanic children live in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates than those of the worst-off poor white children.⁶

Furthermore, we find that *metropolitan areas with the highest segregation levels have the most unequal geographies of neighborhood poverty*. In the five metro areas (of the largest 100) where black children experience the highest levels of residential segregation, 86 percent of black children live in higher-poverty neighborhoods than the worst-off white children. But in the five least segregated metros, 57 percent of black children live in higher-poverty neighborhoods than the worst-off white children. The corresponding figures for Hispanic children in high- and low-segregation areas are 74 percent and 44 percent.⁷

CHILDREN'S NEIGHBORHOOD DIFFERENCES EXTEND BEYOND POVERTY

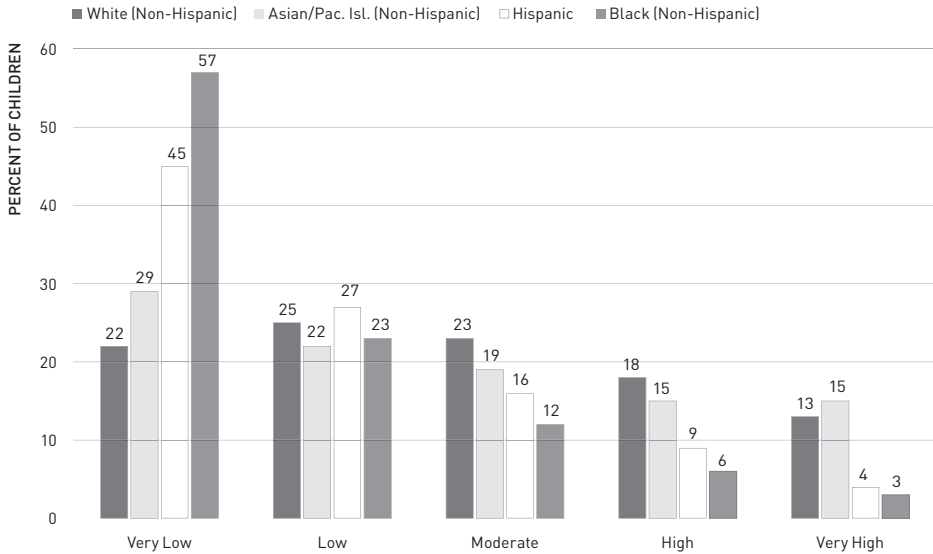
Research on neighborhoods has more recently advanced beyond use of single indicators, such as poverty, to more complex aggregate indices that capture a range of neighborhood assets and stressors. These measures incorporate an understanding that the effects of neighborhood stressors on child wellbeing can be cumulative, as when high poverty neighborhoods also have high levels of violent crime, but can also be offset by positive neighborhood factors.⁸

One such aggregate measure of neighborhood factors is the Child Opportunity Index (COI), developed by diversitydatakids.org and the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity. For the 100 largest metropolitan areas, the COI combines 19 separate component indicators in three overall domains — Education, Health and Environment, and Social and Economic — into a composite opportunity index score, which positions/ranks each neighborhood (census tract) relative to all other neighborhoods in its metro area. Each of the individual indicators was vetted for relevance to child development based on empirical literature on neighborhood effects and/or conceptual frameworks of neighborhood influences on children. In addition to relevance, data availability guided indicator selection for each domain.⁹

For each metro area, neighborhoods were assigned one of five Child Opportunity Index categories — Very Low, Low, Moderate, High, Very High — based on the quintile rank of their opportunity index scores. Thus, the census tracts identified as “very high” opportunity represent the top 20 percent of scores among census tracts within a metro area. Conversely, census tracts identified as “very low” opportunity represent the lowest scoring 20 percent of tracts within a metro area.

Combining these COI opportunity categories with the residence patterns of children by race/ethnicity shows that minority children, particularly black and Hispanic children, are dramatically more likely to live in lower-opportunity neighborhoods. While only 9 percent of white children live in the 20 percent of neighborhoods ranked as lowest in opportunity, 32 percent of Hispanic and 40 percent of black children live in such neighborhoods. These disparities remain after controlling for children's own poverty status. Looking just at poor children, 22 percent of white children live in the 20 percent of neighborhoods ranked as lowest in opportunity, but 45 percent of Hispanic and 57 percent of black children live in such neighborhoods (Figure 1). As in our analysis of neighborhoods by poverty status, we find that racial/ethnic inequities in neighborhood opportunities for children are larger in metro areas with higher levels of segregation.¹⁰

Figure 1: Percent of Poor Children, by Race/Ethnicity, Living in Each Neighborhood Opportunity Category



Note: Data are for 100 largest metropolitan areas combined. Racial groups exclude Hispanic members. Hispanics may be of any race.

Source: diversitydatakids.org/Kirwan Institute Child Opportunity Index and U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 2011, 5-year estimates.

EFFECTS OF RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION ON CHILDREN

The separate and unequal neighborhoods where children of different backgrounds reside have strong associations with child outcomes. While much of the pertinent research on this topic focuses on a single measure of neighborhood environment, commonly poverty, and does not draw causal conclusions, several rigorous, causal studies substantiate the detrimental effects that neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage has on children.¹¹

The connections between neighborhood socioeconomic status and a host of child and adolescent outcomes have been well documented, including links to behavior problems, juvenile delinquency, academic achievement, and health. Additional studies find that other neighborhood factors, such as public safety, levels of trust among neighbors, availability of safe recreational spaces, and access to affordable, healthy food also influence children. Differential exposure to neighborhood violent crime is one important stressor which arguably differs by race/ethnicity and has important implications for child development. While national data on exposure to crime is not available, several studies utilizing Chicago data cast important light. Timberlake and Kirk find that, by either a subjective measure (e.g., seeing someone attacked by a knife, saw someone get shot, or heard a gunshot within previous year) or an objective measure based on

neighborhood crime statistics, white children are much more likely than blacks to live the vast majority of their childhood years in virtually violence-free neighborhoods. Also focusing on Chicago, Sharkey finds that exposure to homicide impairs children's cognitive functioning and self-regulatory behavior through the mechanism of generating acute psychological distress among their caregivers. It is perhaps unsurprising, given the sharp differences in segregated neighborhoods and the choices and life trajectories that youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods foresee, that segregation has also been associated with altering youth decision-making processes. Although most of these studies do not establish causality between neighborhood conditions and child outcomes, they strongly suggest that, beyond neighborhood poverty, a wide range of neighborhood characteristics may influence children.¹²

Isolating the precise effects of neighborhood conditions on child outcomes is challenging because the same factors that lead people to choose certain types of neighborhoods may also impact their children's outcomes. Nevertheless, a few rigorous studies do separate family from neighborhood influences and find independent neighborhood effects. Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush found that the verbal abilities of black children residing in severely disadvantaged neighborhood were reduced by a magnitude equivalent to a year or more of schooling, on average. An analysis of Moving to Opportunity program data showed greater earnings and higher-quality college education as adults for children who moved from a high-poverty to a low-poverty neighborhood before the age of 13, as compared to children remaining in high-poverty areas. Further, Santiago and colleagues found that several neighborhood characteristics predict outcomes for low-income Latino and African-American children across multiple dimensions, even after controlling for many household, child, and caregiver traits. Among the impacted domains are exposure to violence, risky behaviors, physical and behavioral health, education, marriage and childbearing, and youth labor market outcomes. For example, in neighborhoods where greater shares of residents work in high-prestige occupations, children had better educational outcomes and engaged in fewer risky behaviors. Also, children living in areas with lower property crime rates had better health outcomes with regard to conditions such as anxiety, depression, obesity, asthma, and neurodevelopmental disorders. While these studies find that neighborhoods themselves matter for child development, the precise mechanisms through which these effects occur is an important area of further exploration.¹³

SEGREGATED NEIGHBORHOODS/SEGREGATED SCHOOLS

Highest Levels of Segregation Occur at Critical Preschool Age

Segregated schools are perhaps the most powerful pathways through which segregated neighborhoods affect children. Seventy-eight percent of all students attend public schools to which they have been assigned, usually based on neighborhood of residence, and 84 percent of public school students attend assigned schools. Charter schools,

which have more flexibility to draw students from wider and potentially more diverse areas, are even more racially segregated than traditional public schools, while private schools draw a disproportionately large share of white students. A new study of private school vouchers finds that, on net, they also are likely to exacerbate segregation.¹⁴

Ironically, children are most separate at the very ages when they are developing racial attitudes. Preschool children are segregated by the types of programs they attend and also within such programs. Those children from higher socioeconomic status families more commonly attend center-based preschools, while Hispanic families are disproportionately less likely to attend such programs. Further, the development of certain programs, such as Head Start, specifically as avenues to provide opportunities for low-income children, has led to disproportionate enrollment of low-income and black students.¹⁵

While it is difficult to examine the extent of segregation across all preschool settings, in a study of almost 28,000 public school preschools, Frankenberg found that over half of Hispanic and black students attend schools that are at least 90 percent children of color. This degree of isolation exceeds that experienced by students in grades K-12. Still, white students experience the highest levels of racial isolation relative to their own specific racial/ethnic group. Comprising 41 percent of enrollment, white students attend preschools that are, on average, almost 70 percent white.¹⁶

As in segregated K-12 schools, black and Hispanic children attending racially isolated preschools suffer from less adequate resources, including less qualified teachers. Preschool segregation also squanders a particularly fruitful time during child development and an environment that could be potentially ideal for fostering intergroup contact necessary for developing healthy racial attitudes. Research has found that the most positive effects of integration occur when inter-racial experiences are earliest, and that cross-racial friendships are most common among younger children. Not only can these relationships and friendships help to counter prejudice, but even being exposed to diverse faces at young ages can reduce people's implicit bias towards blacks when they become adults.¹⁷

Rising Income Segregation Isolates Poor and Minority Students in Disadvantaged Schools

Increasing income segregation, parental choices, governmental and school policies, and, in some areas, fragmentation of geography into many, individual school districts, leave large numbers of lower-income, black and Latino students in isolated and disadvantaged schools. These inequities are increasingly consequential as students of color comprise larger shares of school enrollment. In 2014, white students made up less than half of public school enrollment, down from 79 percent in 1970, and

Hispanic students now comprise over a quarter of enrollment. It is primarily this changing racial composition, rather than increasingly uneven distributions of different races/ethnicities across schools, that has led to white students experiencing greater exposure to non-white classmates at the same time that black and Hispanic students are increasingly isolated, often to an extreme degree.¹⁸

At the same time, income segregation has been rising, driven in part by growth in income inequality. Between 1990 and 2010, between-*district* income segregation increased by more than 15 percent for families with children in public schools. Over roughly the same period, between-*school* segregation of students who were eligible and those who were ineligible for free lunch increased by more than 40 percent in large school districts.¹⁹

The interaction between race/ethnicity and income means that black and Hispanic students are often segregated into both racially isolated and high-poverty schools. While public school students of all races/ethnicities are increasingly in schools with larger shares of low-income students, there are clear inequities by race/ethnicity.²⁰ By 2013, when low-income students made up 52 percent of enrollment, the average black or Hispanic student attended schools that were 68 percent low-income, while the average white or Asian students attended schools that were 40 percent and 42 percent low-income, respectively.²¹

Effects of Segregation/Integration on Academic Achievement

The disadvantages of attending a concentrated poverty school have been well documented, most prominently in the influential Coleman report as well as in a more recent analysis of the same data showing that the socioeconomic status of a student's school was even more important in predicting achievement than a student's own status. Numerous studies have shown the detriments of attending segregated, high-poverty schools on math and reading scores as well as on drop-out rates, while others have shown that black and Hispanic students exhibit improved achievement in integrated settings, while white students are not harmed. More recently, Schwartz's study of low-income children living in public housing in Montgomery County, Maryland whose families were randomly assigned to housing in neighborhoods with different poverty rates (with corresponding differences in school poverty) found that, in both math and reading, elementary school students who had been assigned to low-poverty schools significantly outscored their peers in moderate-poverty schools after five to seven years. By the end of elementary school, the substantial achievement gap between public housing children in the district's most advantaged schools and non-poor students was cut in half for math and by one-third for reading.²²

The relationships between racial/ethnic segregation and achievement gaps are complex. However, in a comprehensive study, Reardon concluded that all of the association between segregation and achievement gaps could be explained by differential exposure to school poverty alone and that black/Hispanic achievement gaps with whites are much higher when they attend schools with higher poverty concentrations. The mechanisms through which schools with less concentrated poverty improve achievement include “more equitable access to important resources such as structural facilities, highly qualified teachers, challenging courses, private and public funding, social and cultural capital,” significantly higher educational expectations from school staff and students, and lower levels of violence and social disorder than segregated schools. Higher per-pupil spending and lower student-teacher ratios are also mechanisms by which integrated schools lead to an increased likelihood of graduation among black students, according to a recent study on exposure of black students to court-ordered desegregation which found a 2-percentage-point increase in the probability of graduating high school for every year spent in an integrated school under court oversight.²³

School Integration Brings Benefits Beyond Achievement Gains

Education policy has focused intensely on achievement over the past several years. However, the growing diversity of the nation and globalization of economies suggest that other educational goals are worth pursuing. Integrated, diverse education has been shown to improve critical thinking and problem solving skills, the development of cross-racial trust, and the ability to navigate cultural differences. Integrated schooling holds promise even for helping to break the vicious cycle of segregated housing and education, as students who attend integrated schools have been shown to more commonly seek out integrated settings in later life, including being more likely to live in diverse neighborhoods following graduation.²⁴

These benefits accrue not only to individuals, but arguably to the economy and civic society as well. Cross-cultural navigational skills are valued in the marketplace, as shown by the overwhelming response of major employers that it is “important” that employees be “comfortable working with colleagues, customers, and/or clients from diverse cultural backgrounds.” The reduction in bias and stereotypes, along with increased empathy and understanding of other races fostered by integrated education, all prepare students to be better citizens in our increasingly diverse democracy.²⁵

DISCUSSION

As the child population becomes increasingly racially/ethnically diverse and income segregation among families with children grows, the consequences of segregation become even more far-reaching. At the same time, the new and still developing federal political and policy landscape appears challenging. Both the 2016 Republican Party

platform and the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development have fiercely criticized important advances in Fair Housing, such as the Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing rule.²⁶ The extent of the new administration's tax and entitlement/benefits policies is still unknown. But if these policies serve to further increase income inequality, they are likely to also further fuel segregation and its costs.

The Department of Education has signaled support for school choice policies, although with a strong emphasis on privatization and certain mechanisms, such as private school vouchers, which would arguably increase rather than reduce segregation. In some cases, such as interdistrict choice, magnet schools, intentionally diverse charter schools, and controlled choice when accompanied by parent information and transportation programs, choice policies can reduce segregation. The interdistrict magnet school program which draws from the City of Hartford, Connecticut and surrounding communities, while not without its challenges, is one example of providing high-quality, diverse education. Even charter schools, which have typically been highly segregated, can foster integration when intentionally designed, as with the dozens of schools participating in the National Coalition of Diverse Charter Schools. Any type of school choice program must work to inform and empower those parents who face special barriers to participation, so that choice does not just benefit children of the already advantaged. And, of course, the mere desegregation of schools is only the necessary first step in achieving integration — further intentional measures must be taken both within schools and within classrooms to foster the environment and processes critical to reaping the rewards of diversity.

At the local level, the combination of exclusionary zoning, which keeps affordable, rental, and multi-family housing (especially larger units suitable for families with children) out of higher opportunity areas; fragmented municipal and school boundaries; growing income inequality; and school districts largely funded through property taxes all conspire to exacerbate segregation of children. While it is now almost a cliché that “housing policy is school policy,” it is undeniably true. Given the close connection between residential patterns and school assignment, the policies that encourage neighborhood integration, including affirmatively furthering fair housing, enforcing anti-discrimination laws, providing incentives for affordable housing construction in higher opportunity areas, and inclusionary zoning, would likely also reduce segregation in schools.

Mounting research evidence increasingly reveals the cost of such segregation in terms of children's health, education, and long-term economic success. Beyond its impact on access to important neighborhood and school resources, the separation of children during childhood perpetuates the development of racial prejudices and stereotypes, or, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “the false sense of superiority of the

segregators and the false sense of inferiority of the segregated.”²⁷ Optimistic claims that we had moved into a “post-racial” era following the Obama election have been sadly refuted by police shootings of unarmed blacks, the subsequent rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and its backlash, and the racially/ethnically charged anti-immigrant rhetoric of the 2016 presidential campaign. In that integration can promote cross-racial understanding and empathy, it is a valuable tool to enhance not only the wellbeing of individuals, but of our society as a whole.

Segregation is a demographic and spatial reality, as described above, but, more critically, it is also a device used by a dominant group for maintaining their higher status vis-à-vis others through limiting social interaction.²⁸ It is natural for families to desire the best for their children, but to the extent that those with power and advantage are able to influence and perpetuate policies in order to hoard benefits and opportunity, leaving disadvantaged children in circumstances which may dramatically influence their life courses for the worse, we must question whether we are and will be “one nation, indivisible.”

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Endnotes

- 1 Johnson (1965).
- 2 Tench (2003); Russell (2004).
- 3 Iceland et al. (2010); Jargowsky (2014).
- 4 Owens (2016).
- 5 Upper quartile poverty rates for white children ranged from a low of 4 percent to a high of 20 percent across these markets, excluding outlier metro McAllen, TX with an upper quartile rate for white children of 37 percent.
- 6 Acevedo-Garcia et al. (2008).
- 7 For each racial/ethnic group, differences are highly significant by segregation level ($p < 0.005$); *ibid*.
- 8 Theall, Drury, and Shirtcliff (2012).
- 9 diversitydatakids.org and Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2014).
- 10 Acevedo-Garcia et al. (2016).
- 11 *Ibid*.
- 12 Leventhal, Dupéré, and Brooks-Gunn (2009); Kawachi and Berkman (2003); Ellen and Glied (2015); Sharkey (2013); Newburger, Birch, and Wachter (2011); Timberlake and Kirk (2011); Sharkey et al. (2012); Galster and Killen (1995).
- 13 Diez-Roux (2003); Sampson, Sharkey, and Raudenbush (2008); Chetty, Hendren, and Katz (2016); Santiago et al. (2014).
- 14 Noel, Stark, and Redford (2016); Frankenberg, Siegel, Hawley, and Wang (2010); Suits (2016); Potter (2017).
- 15 Frankenberg (2016); Joshi, Geronimo, and Acevedo-Garcia (2016).
- 16 Frankenberg (2016).
- 17 Reid and Kagan (2015); Reid (2016); Brief of 553 Social Scientists (2006); Aboud, Mendelson, and Purdy (2003); Howes and Wu (1990); Cloutier, Li, and Correll (2014).
- 18 Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo (2016); Orfield et al. (2016); Fiel (2013).
- 19 Owens, Reardon, and Jencks (2016).
- 20 Defined as those eligible for free- or reduced-price school lunch.
- 21 Orfield et al. (2016).
- 22 Borman and Dowling (2010); Wells et al. (2009); Mickelson (2008); Schwartz (2010).
- 23 Reardon (2015); Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo (2016); R. Johnson (2015).

- 24 Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo (2016); Mickelson (2016); Phillips et al. (2009).
- 25 Hart Research Associates (2013); Wells, Fox, and Cordova-Cobo (2016); Wells and Crain (1994).
- 26 Republican Party Platform Committee (2016); Carson (2015).
- 27 King (1963).
- 28 Freeman (1978).