

Housing, School Segregation and Intergenerational Inequality in the United States

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Housing segregation is a fundamental mechanism of inequality in metropolitan societies and education is the central way that the inequality is transmitted to the next generation. Housing policy is often discussed in terms of its physical features, design, and healthy conditions, but stratification, inequality and denial of equal opportunity are primarily about location. Location is very heavily priced into housing costs everywhere because it involves prestige, convenience, social contacts and networks, peer groups for children, contacts that may lead to jobs, safety and comfort in daily life, and, importantly, schooling opportunity. Where location is strongly determined by race or ethnicity, serious segregation exists. Where there is school assignment by segregated housing location, the link is exceedingly clear.

If the housing market is extremely stratified or if marginal or excluded groups are housed in an isolated fashion as the result either of government policy (well intentioned though it might be) or of private discrimination, then the supposedly neutral process of sending children to the nearest school becomes a powerful mechanism for perpetuating or even deepening inequality because of differences in teacher quality and experience, student peer groups, community resources, and other key forms of inequality among schools. Even when families are offered school choices, the results tend to reflect and often deepen inequality because the more privileged families in neighborhoods with stronger social capital and networks are able to make more informed choices and call on personal contacts to

ensure they receive their first choice. Markets can only aid equity when information and access (including free and convenient transportation) are equalized and barriers such as discrimination and hostility are ended.

The basic mechanism of U.S. racial subordination today is neither violence and subjugation nor state imposed racial controls, it is a system of residential separation linked to highly segregated and unequal schooling that is seen by most Americans as a system of private choices about housing through market mechanisms but which looks very different to many families of color. It embodies systems of discrimination that function to connect whites to networks of social capital and economic and educational opportunities while seriously disconnecting blacks and Latinos. This system is the product of both government policy and practice and of a variety of private forms of discrimination, differential knowledge and contacts, fears, and constrained choices growing out of the earlier history of discrimination. It can perpetuate residential isolation now even without active discrimination. Segregation, once established, is a durable and expansive system that tends to last and to spread and to be built into a variety of practices and norms.

Groups on opposite sides of lines of separation and inequality tend to see the society through different lenses, as is apparent in the following question from a *Washington Post* survey following the election of President Obama:

How big a problem is racism in our society today? Is it a big problem, somewhat of a problem, a small problem or not a problem at all? (Responses from 1995 and 2009).

		Problem			Not a problem			No opinion
		Net	Big	Somewhat	Net	Small	Not a problem at all	
2009	All	74	26	48	26	22	4	*
	Blacks	85	44	41	15	11	4	0
	Whites	72	22	49	28	23	5	*
1995	All	83	41	42	24	12	12	1
	Blacks	95	68	27	6	5	1	*
	Whites	83	38	45	17	13	4	1

Even in the optimistic aftermath of the election of President Obama, the vast majority of Americans think racism remains a problem.

Schools, Housing, and Civil Rights

Unequal schools serving unequal communities perpetuate social inequalities and create unequal lives. Bourdieu and Passeron¹ argued that the schools had largely replaced traditional means of passing on status to the next generation. This has become increasingly apparent in the U.S. as income and life chances have become much more strongly linked to educational attainment in the post-industrial economy. Income gaps have widened and social mobility has declined in part because of extremely large class and race-related gaps in college attainment. In the United States, large numbers of Black, Mexican, and American Indian students simply leave often inferior schools where they experience academic failures, less experienced teachers, more negative attitudes and perceived inferior status, resulting in school drop out rates of 50% and higher in many urban areas. Today, more than one-third of whites acquire at least a Bachelor's degree, while less than one-fifth of blacks and only one of every 10 Latinos holds a college degree.² Unequal schooling in metropolitan areas often perpetuates the effect of segregated housing by consigning the less educated to neighborhoods with weak schools, creating a vicious cycle from which it becomes very difficult to emerge.³

French and American publics both express desire for equal opportunity.⁴

This paper touches on several issues actively debated in both the U.S. and France, both nations historically committed to ideas of equality. A 2008 survey comparing attitudes about discrimination in France, the U.S., and 14 other countries indicated that American and French values were quite similar, although the institutions and policies are very different. 96% of Americans and 94% of the French say they believe that "equal treatment of different races and ethnicities" is important, with 79% of Americans and 69% of French saying it is very important. 85% of Americans and 83% of French say that the government should act against discrimination. Less than a fifth (18%) of French however, believe that government is already doing enough, compared to 55% of Americans. With respect to schooling, a 2007 article⁵ reporting on attitudes of parents in a diverse neighborhood on the periphery of Paris showed that even liberal parents committed to diversity worried about too much contact with disadvantaged children and adopted strategies to avoid it or ameliorate its impacts. The French parents, coming from a society that emphasized universalism and assimilation into French culture tended to see minority families through a lens of socio-economic status, not families from a different cultural and linguistic background,

and therefore favored more remediation to bring them up to level. The temptation in polarized societies is strong to move from a discourse that denounces structural social inequality to one that blames pupils and parents in the subordinated groups.

National Differences

There are, of course, important differences between the nations. The U.S. was born as a multiracial nation and cursed with slavery and bitter conflicts and wars with native communities. It expanded hugely not only from purchase of a vast part of a continent from France but also from wars with Mexico and Spain which brought in conquered populations whose culture and language were devalued and whose people were subordinated. These issues are not small or recent; they were the cause of a civil war, and even after that, a century long caste system of social relationships, economic subordination and political exclusion in the South, where most blacks lived. With the migration of many Blacks to the North, strict housing segregation became a fact of life in the northern industrial cities. Until 1948 courts enforced legal agreements among residents of white neighborhoods that made it illegal to sell to minority buyers. Until 1968 there was no legal barrier to racial discrimination in real estate.

Unlike France, the U.S. was not a major colonial power and therefore did not socialize vast numbers of potential immigrants to its language and culture. It has not taken away citizenship from groups that were granted it. It has never had a centralized education system or a uniform curriculum and there has always been wide religious and cultural diversity. The U.S. has the most modest system of social supports to alleviate poverty, except for the elderly, of the advanced nations and France's has been much more ample, especially for children and families.⁶

How has American society attempted to deal with the inequalities that are fostered by housing separation?

In the U.S., extensive civil rights enforcement, including race conscious efforts to desegregate schools and housing have been essential in serious efforts to break these vicious cycles of inequality and

have provoked major political conflict. Massive progress was achieved for decades against what had been totally segregated schooling in the South and the housing markets in many metropolitan areas have become less segregated for blacks since 1970. Both residential and school segregation of Latinos, on the other hand, has been rising as their numbers soar.⁷ Conservative governments have cut away at these desegregation policies.

When Azouz Begag⁸ describes the ZEPs for the schools and the ZUPs for the poor areas, it sounds very much like what was called Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education program, which has now been concentrating money in high poverty schools for 44 years, and programs like the Community Action Program of the 1964 War on Poverty, which tried to empower poor neighborhoods, and the Model Cities legislation of the late 1960s, which was intended to produce coordinated multidimensional plans to uplift troubled inner city communities. Many of these programs were curtailed or abandoned, however, when the Republicans came to power.⁹

The U.S. offers massive subsidies to private homeownership, but the primary housing policy for minorities and the poor has been federal subsidized housing. However, concentrating thousands of families together in dense high-rise communities of poverty and hopelessness resulted in gangs and drug dealers taking over the worst of the buildings, with the only people willing to live there being residents who had absolutely no other choice. Police simply stopped trying to restore order, fearing for their own safety in these dangerous environments. The failure of the worst big projects, like those in St. Louis and Chicago, was so rapid and so dramatic that the Congress voted to ban building any more such projects when it reformed housing law in 1968. By the 1970s, the worst of the projects were becoming uninhabitable centers of crime and degradation. The federal government began to pay to blow up the projects it had paid to build only a generation earlier. By now, many of the largest projects in a number of cities have been destroyed and largely replaced by subsidies to individual families, with mixed results. Though housing discrimination remains serious it is rarely prosecuted.

There has been a widespread ongoing debate in the

U.S. about place-based versus mobility-based policies, although a number of observers think that both are needed and that neither has been implemented on a substantial basis. One of the central problems with the place-based strategy in an economy dominated by private market decisions is that putting new housing into an area where there is no significant private investment and where middle class families are not entering generally leaves the residents with weak schools and job opportunities. On the other hand, mobility plans have been limited and their results controversial, with strong evidence of benefits in the largest race-based mobility plan in metro Chicago and weaker evidence from more modest class-based plans in several cities under the Moving to Opportunity Program. There have also been a number of experiments requiring suburban housing developers to produce a share of housing that is affordable for low and moderate income families, but minority families rarely get significant access unless there is explicitly race-based marketing.¹⁰

One of the reasons why the American struggle over race has focused so strongly on the schools rather than housing is that housing transactions are individual and complicated, overwhelmingly occur in private markets in the U.S., and it is easy to hide many forms of discrimination. It is much easier to change policies of school assignment.

School-focused strategies

The primary school-based strategies to reduce inequalities include aid to impoverished schools, sanctions against low achievement and desegregation. The effects of the school integration produced by desegregation plans depend on the composition of the receiving school and how the plans are implemented. Overall, however, desegregation tends to improve test scores modestly and significantly improve chances of high school graduation, college degree attainment, and job success for minority children. It has no negative achievement effect on white children. Surveys of students in desegregated schools produce highly positive findings of all groups about the degree to which they feel comfortable and knowledgeable about each other and well prepared to live and work in integrated communities.¹¹ However, over the last three decades, an increasingly conservative

Supreme Court has eroded most of the legal avenues for achieving integrated schooling. The Obama administration will have significant impact on the courts through appointments.

Most desegregation initiatives in the past 30 years have been based on choice systems with racial integration goals and selection procedures. Perhaps the most successful of these have been magnet schools that offer an attractive specialized curriculum, such as science or arts magnets. Dedicated to creating diverse environments, they attempt to balance their enrollments racially. There are now more than two million students attending magnet schools across the U.S. These too, however, have suffered from recent court decisions that limit schools' ability to consider race in enrollment.

Multiculturalism has been another important, but limited strategy that teaches students to appreciate and respect each other's cultural heritages and history, provides opportunities for equal status relationships in the classroom, and often incorporates students' languages as both medium of instruction as well as target of instruction. A particularly attractive example is dual immersion classrooms, where both majority and minority language groups learn together with equal emphasis on both languages. Research shows that minority language students tend to have superior academic outcomes in such settings while majority language students gain competence in an additional language. In the US such programs often have long waiting lists as majority language parents are anxious for their children to learn an additional language.¹²

Disadvantaged students, who are clustered into schools together, are often taught by teachers who lack understanding of their personal challenges and who cannot communicate with them or their parents in their own language. Seeing that their students are not as prepared or knowledgeable about the curriculum, teachers often hold low expectations for them. Teacher professional development, therefore, has been a widely used strategy to diminish the low achievement of minority students. Many millions of dollars have been poured into training teachers to be more sensitive to cultural and socioeconomic differences in their students. Researchers have generally concluded that it is easier to train a teacher from the students' communities to be a

good pedagogue than it is to train a good pedagogue to be sensitive to students' differences; however, there is a severe shortage of nonwhite teachers, and there have been successes along both dimensions.¹³

Towards greater equality

Before the civil rights era in the U.S. it was often difficult or impossible to obtain data about the situation of minority children and families within various institutions. Requiring such data in all programs receiving public funds was a major impact of the great civil rights laws of the 1960s and those systems have continued because they disclosed many problems that had been ignored and proved essential in evaluating policy impacts. Without good data there is simply no way to know how serious problems of racial and ethnic inequality are, to investigate patterns of causation, or to evaluate proposed solutions. As a result, much becomes subjective and impressionistic and few agencies or institutions voluntarily disclose the specifics of ethnic inequality within their operations. Particularly where ethnicity is inferred by immigrant status, it is possible to come to very erroneous conclusions in a category that lumps together high and low status immigrants and does not permit to determine whether or not succeeding generations are integrated or ghettoized. Our data show that there are also very severe shortcomings in policies that attempt to treat racial and ethnic inequality through class based remedies in situations where ethnicity is a strong independent variable, shortcomings that are missed without adequate data. We must be able to describe the problem accurately if we are to address it effectively.

The full version of Patricia Gándara and Gary Orfield's report will be available July 1st 2009 on: <http://www.frenchamerican.org/cms/gandara-orfield-segregation2009>

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