

The Atlantic

Segregation Now, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever?

Even if white people no longer openly promote having neighborhoods and schools to themselves, many of them continue to help make that happen.



A map of Brooklyn, with each dot representing a resident, color-coded by race. Blue stands for white, green for black, red for Asian, orange for Hispanic, and brown for other

Dustin A. Cable / Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service, Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia

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FEB 4, 2016 | BUSINESS

TEXT SIZE



Progress has undoubtedly been made since the days of explicit segregation, and most white people no longer openly advocate for segregation in neighborhoods, schools, and offices. [When speaking to researchers](#), many

even argue that integration is important and necessary. At the same time, old racial stereotypes die hard, and perceptions that black people are lazy, criminal, and dim-witted contribute to the maintenance of segregation and the inequalities that result from it. Despite laws prohibiting segregation—most notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964—it persists on several fronts today.

Some of the most striking studies done on present-day segregation have to do with how it's connected to the ways families share money and other resources among themselves. The sociologist Thomas Shapiro, for instance, [argues](#) that the greater wealth that white parents are likely to have allows them to help out their children with down payments, college tuition, and other significant expenses that would otherwise create debt. As a result, white families often use these “transformative assets” to purchase homes in predominantly white neighborhoods, based on the belief that sending their children to mostly white schools in these areas will offer them a competitive advantage. (These schools are usually evaluated in racial and economic terms, not by class size, teacher quality, or other measures shown to have an impact on student success.) Shapiro's research shows that while whites no longer explicitly say that they will not live around blacks, existing wealth disparities enable them to make well-meaning decisions that, unfortunately, still serve to reproduce racial segregation in residential and educational settings.

Black Americans, on the other hand, are much less likely to have access to transformative assets. As the sociologists Mary Pattillo, Douglas Massey, and Nancy Denton have shown, a consequence of this is that blacks are less likely to own homes. And when they do, they are [more likely](#) to live in neighborhoods that [are adjacent to poor black communities](#) (and the less well-funded schools that are situated there).

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In fact, for black people, the transmission of wealth often goes in the opposite direction. In contrast to whites, who are more likely to pass wealth down to the next generation, blacks are **more likely** to provide some form of financial support to their parents, grandparents, and extended family. This flow of money leaves black families—even those in the middle class—without the extra help that many of their white peers grow up taking for granted.

Shapiro's research lays the groundwork for how residential racial segregation persists, and the homogeneity of neighborhoods can pave the way for disparities in other realms, such as the workplace.

Sociologists have shown convincingly that social networks—ties to peers, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances—matter immensely in determining access to jobs. **Deirdre Royster's study** of black and white men working in skilled blue-collar jobs found that white male teachers routinely reserved tips and knowledge about the most desirable jobs for their white male students. Though black male students displayed equivalent work ethics, skill levels, and expectations for starting wages, white teachers simply did not give them the same information they offered their white peers. Other sociologists, **such as Lauren Rivera**, find similar processes at work in other occupations, wherein whites typically build all-white social networks, then offer important tips and references to those in their social circles. So, when whites live around and befriend mostly other whites, their everyday, innocuous decisions about where to move, whom to recommend for a job, and which school to send their children to can have the unintended consequence of maintaining racial inequalities.

This understanding of how racial stratification is perpetuated indicates that

America's policy makers have yet to catch up with what's happening on the ground. In 2014, then-House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan lamented a "tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work." In Ryan's telling, men in the inner city are poor because they do not work, think about working, or know the value and culture of work.

This argument ignores reams of research suggesting that the number of skilled jobs has diminished, access to high-quality education is undermined by the existence of predominantly white neighborhoods, and the connections that help secure steady employment often stay within racially-exclusive social networks. Influential politicians who do not incorporate these findings into their legislative decision-making won't be enacting policies that reflect—or, more importantly, attempt to challenge—the ways modern-day segregation keeps reproducing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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