
CHAPTER 13

American Apartheid

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During the 1970s and 1980s a word disappeared from the American vocabulary. It was not in the speeches of politicians decrying the multiple ills besetting American cities. It was not spoken by government officials responsible for administering the nation's social programs. It was not mentioned by journalists reporting on the rising tide of homelessness, drugs and violence in urban America. It was not discussed by foundation executives and think-tank experts proposing new programs for unemployed parents and unwed mothers. It was not articulated by civil rights leaders speaking out against the persistence of racial inequality, and it was nowhere to be found in the thousands of pages written by social scientists on the urban underclass. The word was segregation.

Most Americans vaguely realize that urban America is still a residentially segregated society, but few appreciate the depth of black segregation or the degree to which it is maintained by ongoing institutional arrangements and contemporary individual actions. They view segregation as an unfortunate holdover from a racist past, one that is fading progressively over time. If racial residential segregation persists, they reason, it is only because civil rights laws passed during the 1960s have not had enough time to work or because many blacks still prefer to live in black neighborhoods. The residential segregation of blacks is viewed charitably as a "natural" outcome of impersonal social and economic forces, the same forces that produced Italian and Polish neighborhoods in the past and that yield Mexican and Korean areas today.

But black segregation is not comparable to the limited and transient segregation experienced by other racial and ethnic groups, now or in the past. No group in the history of the United States has ever experienced the sustained high level of residential segregation that has been imposed on blacks in large American cities for the past fifty years. This extreme racial isolation did not just happen; it was manufactured by whites through a series of self-conscious actions and purposeful

institutional arrangements that continue today. Not only is the depth of black segregation unprecedented and utterly unique compared with that of other groups, but it shows little sign of change with the passage of time or improvements in socioeconomic status.

If policymakers, scholars, and the public have been reluctant to acknowledge segregation's persistence, they have likewise been blind to its consequences for American blacks. Residential segregation is not a neutral fact; it systematically undermines the social and economic well-being of blacks in the United States. Because of racial segregation, a significant share of black America is condemned to experience a social environment where poverty and joblessness are the norm, where a majority of children are born out of wedlock, where most families are on welfare, where educational failure prevails, and where social and physical deterioration abound. Through prolonged exposure to such an environment, black chances for social and economic success are drastically reduced.

Deleterious neighborhood conditions are built into the structure of the black community. They occur because segregation concentrates poverty to build a set of mutually reinforcing and self-feeding spirals of decline into black neighborhoods. When economic dislocations deprive a segregated group of employment and increase its rate of poverty, socioeconomic deprivation inevitably becomes more concentrated in neighborhoods where that group lives. The damaging social consequences that follow from increased poverty are spatially concentrated as well, creating uniquely disadvantaged environments that become progressively isolated—geographically, socially, and economically—from the rest of society.

The effect of segregation on black well-being is structural, not individual. Residential segregation lies beyond the ability of any individual to change; it constrains black life chances irrespective of personal traits, individual motivations, or private achievements. For the past twenty years this fundamental fact has been swept under the rug by policymakers, scholars, and theorists of the urban underclass. Segregation is the missing link in prior attempts to understand the plight of the urban poor. As long as blacks continue to be segregated in American cities, the United States cannot be called a race-blind society.

THE FORGOTTEN FACTOR

The present myopia regarding segregation is all the more startling because it once figured prominently in theories of racial inequality. Indeed, the ghetto was once seen as central to black subjugation in the United States. In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal wrote in *An American Dilemma* that residential segregation “is basic in a mechanical sense. It exerts its influence in an indirect and impersonal way: because Negro people do not live near white people, they cannot . . . associate with each other in the many activities founded on common neighborhood. Residential segregation . . . becomes reflected in uni-racial schools, hospitals, and other institutions” and creates “an artificial city . . . that permits any prejudice on the part of public officials to be freely vented on Negroes without hurting whites.”

Kenneth B. Clark, who worked with Gunnar Myrdal as a student and later applied his research skills in the landmark *Brown v. Topeka* school integration case, placed residential segregation at the heart of the U.S. system of racial oppression. In *Dark Ghetto*, written in 1965, he argued that “the dark ghetto’s invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have *no* power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. The dark ghettos are social, political, educational, and—above all—economic colonies. Their inhabitants are subject peoples, victims of the greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt, and fear of their masters.”

Public recognition of segregation’s role in perpetuating racial inequality was galvanized in the late 1960s by the riots that erupted in the nation’s ghettos. In their aftermath, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois to identify the causes of the violence and to propose policies to prevent its recurrence. The Kerner Commission released its report in March 1968 with the shocking admonition that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.” Prominent among the causes that the commission identified for this growing racial inequality was residential segregation.

In stark, blunt language, the Kerner Commission informed white Americans that “discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.” “Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”

The report argued that to continue present policies was “to make permanent the division of our country into two societies; one, largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities; the other, predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs.” Commission members rejected a strategy of ghetto enrichment coupled with abandonment of efforts to integrate, an approach they saw “as another way of choosing a permanently divided country.” Rather, they insisted that the only reasonable choice for America was “a policy which combines ghetto enrichment with programs designed to encourage integration of substantial numbers of Negroes into the society outside the ghetto.”

America chose differently. Following the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, the problem of housing discrimination was declared solved, and residential segregation dropped off the national agenda. Civil rights leaders stopped pressing for the enforcement of open housing, political leaders increasingly debated employment and educational policies rather than housing integration, and academicians focused their theoretical scrutiny on everything from culture to family structure, to institutional racism, to federal welfare systems. Few people spoke of racial segregation as a problem or acknowledged its persisting consequences. By the end of the 1970s residential segregation became the forgotten factor in American race relations.

RACE VERSUS CLASS: AN UNEQUAL CONTEST

Before exploring the continuing causes of segregation, we assess the extent to which the geographic separation of blacks and whites may be attributed to economic differences between the two groups. In the market-driven, status-conscious society of the United States, affluent families live in different neighborhoods than poor families, and to the extent that blacks are poor and whites are affluent, the two groups will tend to be physically separated from one another. Is what appears to be racial segregation actually segregation on the basis of social class?

Economic arguments can be invoked to explain why levels of black–white segregation changed so little during the 1970s. After decades of steady improvement, black economic progress stalled in 1973, bringing about a rise in black poverty and an increase in income inequality. As the black income distribution bifurcated, middle-class families experienced downward mobility and fewer households possessed the socioeconomic resources necessary to sustain residential mobility and, hence, integration. If the economic progress of the 1950s and 1960s had been sustained into the 1970s, segregation levels might have fallen more significantly. William Clark estimates that 30%–70% of racial segregation is attributable to economic factors, which, together with urban structure and neighborhood preferences, “bear much of the explanatory weight for present residential patterns.”

Arguments about whether racial segregation stems from white racism or from economic disadvantages are part of a larger debate on the relative importance of race and class in American society. Some observers hold that black social and economic problems now stem from the unusually disadvantaged class position of African Americans; they argue that black poverty has become divorced from race *per se* and is now perpetuated by a complex set of factors, such as joblessness, poor schooling, and family instability, that follow from the transformation of cities from manufacturing to service centers. Other investigators place greater emphasis on racism; they argue that because white prejudice and discrimination have persisted in a variety of forms, both overt and subtle, skin color remains a powerful basis of stratification in the United States.

Since the mid-1970s, the race-class debate has gone on without definitive resolution with respect to a variety of socioeconomic outcomes: employment, wealth, family stability, education, crime. But when one considers residential segregation, the argument is easily and forcefully settled: race clearly predominates. Indeed, race predominates to such an extent that speculations about what would have happened if black economic progress had continued become moot. Even if black incomes had continued to rise through the 1970s, segregation would not have declined: no matter how much blacks earned they remained spatially separated from whites. In 1980, as in the past, money did not buy entry into white neighborhoods of American cities.

The dominance of race over class is illustrated by Table 13.1, which presents black–white dissimilarity indices for three income groups within the thirty largest black communities of the United States. These data show the degree of residential segregation that blacks experience as their family income rises from under \$2,500 per year to more than \$50,000 per year. Although we computed segregation indices for all income categories between these two extremes, in the interest of brevity we

TABLE 13.1 Segregation by Income in Thirty Metropolitan Areas with the Largest Black Populations, 1980

| Metropolitan Area | Income Category | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------|
| | Under \$2,500 | \$25,000–\$27,500 | \$50,000+ |
| <i>Northern areas</i> | | | |
| Boston | 85.1 | 83.9 | 89.1 |
| Buffalo | 85.2 | 80.0 | 90.0 |
| Chicago | 91.1 | 85.8 | 86.3 |
| Cincinnati | 81.7 | 70.9 | 74.2 |
| Cleveland | 91.6 | 87.1 | 86.4 |
| Columbus | 80.3 | 74.6 | 83.4 |
| Detroit | 88.6 | 85.0 | 86.4 |
| Gary–Hammond–E. Chicago | 90.6 | 89.5 | 90.9 |
| Indianapolis | 80.8 | 76.6 | 80.0 |
| Kansas City | 86.1 | 79.3 | 84.2 |
| Los Angeles–Long Beach | 85.4 | 79.8 | 78.9 |
| Milwaukee | 91.3 | 87.9 | 86.3 |
| New York | 86.2 | 81.2 | 78.6 |
| Newark | 85.8 | 79.0 | 77.5 |
| Philadelphia | 84.9 | 78.6 | 81.9 |
| Pittsburgh | 82.1 | 80.6 | 87.9 |
| St. Louis | 87.3 | 78.4 | 83.2 |
| San Francisco–Oakland | 79.9 | 73.7 | 72.1 |
| Average | 85.8 | 80.7 | 83.2 |
| <i>Southern areas</i> | | | |
| Atlanta | 82.2 | 77.3 | 78.2 |
| Baltimore | 82.4 | 72.3 | 76.8 |
| Birmingham | 46.1 | 40.8 | 45.2 |
| Dallas–Ft. Worth | 83.1 | 74.7 | 82.4 |
| Greensboro–Winston Salem | 63.2 | 55.1 | 70.8 |
| Houston | 73.8 | 65.5 | 72.7 |
| Memphis | 73.8 | 66.8 | 69.8 |
| Miami | 81.6 | 78.4 | 76.5 |
| New Orleans | 75.8 | 63.1 | 77.8 |
| Norfolk–Virginia Beach | 70.1 | 63.3 | 72.4 |
| Tampa–St. Petersburg | 81.8 | 76.0 | 85.7 |
| Washington, D.C. | 79.2 | 67.0 | 65.4 |
| Average | 74.4 | 66.7 | 72.8 |

Source: Nancy A. Denton and Douglas S. Massey, “Residential Segregation of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians by Socioeconomic Status and Generation,” *Social Science Quarterly* 69:4, pp. 797–817. Copyright © 1988 by the University of Texas Press. All rights reserved.

only show one middle category (\$25,000–\$27,500). Little is added by including other income groups, because black segregation does not vary by affluence.

Among northern metropolitan areas, for example, blacks, no matter what their income, remain very highly segregated from whites. As of 1980, black families earning

under \$2,500 per year experienced an average segregation index of 86, whereas those earning more than \$50,000 had an average score of 83; blacks in the middle category displayed a score of 81. This pattern of constant, high segregation was replicated in virtually all northern urban areas. In Chicago, for example, the poorest blacks displayed an index of 91; the most affluent blacks had an index of 86. In New York, the respective figures were 86 and 79; and in Los Angeles they were 85 and 79. In no northern metropolitan area did blacks earning more than \$50,000 per year display a segregation index lower than 72.

Although southern areas generally evinced lower levels of racial segregation, the basic pattern by income was the same: rising economic status had little or no effect on the level of segregation that blacks experienced. On average, segregation moved from 74 in the lowest income category to 73 in the highest, with a value of 67 in between. Segregation was particularly high and resistant to change in Atlanta, Baltimore, Dallas, Miami, and Tampa; but even in southern cities with relatively low levels of segregation, there was little evidence of a meaningful differential by income: the poorest blacks in Birmingham, Alabama, displayed a segregation index of 46, whereas the most affluent black families had a segregation index of 45.

One possible explanation for this pattern of constant segregation irrespective of income is that affluent blacks are not well informed about the cost and availability of housing opportunities in white neighborhoods. Reynolds Farley examined this possibility using special data collected in the University of Michigan's Detroit Area Survey. He found that blacks were quite knowledgeable about housing costs throughout the metropolitan area, even in distant white suburbs, and were well aware that they could afford to live outside the ghetto. Whatever was keeping affluent blacks out of white areas, it was not ignorance.

The uniqueness of this pattern of invariant high segregation is starkly revealed when blacks are compared with Hispanics or Asians. In the Los Angeles metropolitan area, for example, the segregation index for Hispanics earning under \$2,500 in 1979 was 64, and it declined to a moderate value of 50 among those earning \$50,000 or more. In the largest Latino barrio in the United States, therefore, the *poorest* Hispanics were less segregated than the *most affluent* blacks (whose score was 79). Similarly, in the San Francisco–Oakland metropolitan area, which contains the largest concentration of Asians in the United States, the Asian–white segregation index fell from 64 in the lowest income category to 52 in the highest (compared with respective black–white indices of 86 and 79). These contrasts were repeated in cities throughout the United States; Hispanic and Asian segregation generally begins at a relatively modest level among the poor and falls steadily as income rises.

Similar patterns are observed when segregation is examined by education and occupation. No matter how socioeconomic status is measured, therefore, black segregation remains universally high while that of Hispanics and Asians falls progressively as status rises. Only blacks experience a pattern of constant, high segregation that is impervious to socioeconomic influences. The persistence of racial segregation in American cities, therefore, is a matter of race and not class. The residential segregation of African Americans cannot be attributed in any meaningful way to the socioeconomic disadvantages they experience, however serious these may be.