

# Racial Segregation and its Impact on Black Communities in the US

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## ABSTRACT

*Recent events have indicated the significant prevalence of racial inequalities in various societal settings (workplace, education, and health) in the United States, despite continuous improvements. Previous research has primarily attributed such a phenomenon to several factors, including cultural norms, racially targeted policies, and income inequality. In this research, I add an element that has often been overlooked yet is crucial to understanding racial disparities: The racialization of urban space in communities across America. In particular, I examine the role that racially targeted urban segregation, especially in the Black community, plays in the internalization and systematization of racial inequalities, resulting in restricting opportunities for minorities. Additionally, I underscore the detrimental impacts on the physical and mental health of Black minorities resulting from such discrimination. Too often, researchers have ignored the role of urban segregation in racial disparities because of legal improvements and the abolition of de jure segregation in the 20th century. In contrast, I argue that racial inequalities largely stem from excessive and embedded racism against Black communities that perpetuate racial segregation. Finally, this paper suggests the implications of these findings for designing more effective action against racial inequalities. By prioritizing low-income households and communities and promoting house mobility and fair housing policies, the harms observed from urban segregation on Black communities can be mitigated. Understanding the implications of urban segregation on minority communities will undoubtedly pave the way for racial equality.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the abolition of de jure segregation, but de facto segregation still haunts the black communities nationwide in the United States. Across the United States, there is an ongoing exclusion and segregation that prevent the African Americans from enjoying rights to get and keep accessible and affordable housing. An article published in the Center for American Progress noted how the structural racism that remains prevalent in the US has contributed to persistent disparities between black and white households [1]. Different studies documented the existence of socioeconomic disparities. For example, recent findings show that in the past 30 years, the average wealth of white families increased by 84%, a rate that is three times the rate for African American families. In contrast, the average wealth of African American families [2]. In his argument, Rothstein noted that we have to re-learn that residential segregation results from racially motivated public policies that hurt many African American families. The prevalent urban segregation significantly affects and limits the socioeconomic status of black minorities in the United States.

## 2. Context

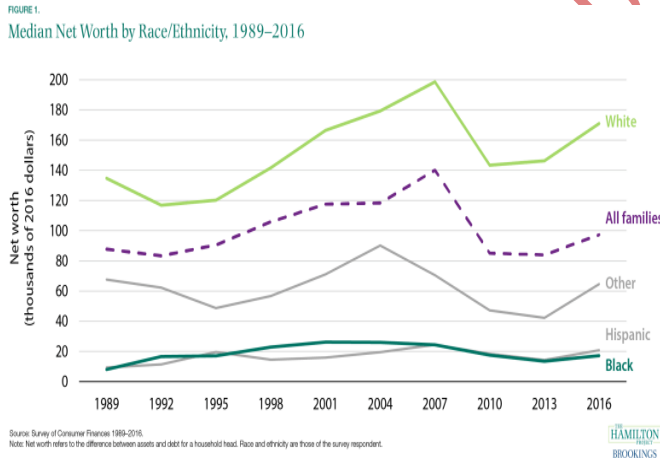
### 2.1 Existence of Racial Segregation

Racial segregation still exists, despite being outlawed hundreds of years ago. The increased rate of ethno-racial diversity in the US has altered the overall structure of segregation in many cities. Still, there are many communities and neighborhoods that remain highly stratified by race [3]. Studies show that in the national level, the Black-White dissimilarity index, which is the measure of how many resident households of U.S. metropolitan areas would have to move to achieve complete black-white integration, has declined from its all-time high of .73 in 1980 to .47 in 2016 [4]. Most cities and metropolitan areas in the US have

witnessed notable declines in Black-White segregation since 1990 [4]. However, while residential segregation today is not as concentrated as it was in the past, observers noted many disappointing facts about its current level.

The fact is, residential segregation, particularly the separation of the African American communities from the whites, continues up to this day. Analyst projected that with the slow rate of integration, it may take another two decades before black-white integration even reaches the level of Hispanic segregation today [5]. A recent research revealed that “on average, both Black and White residents live in small local environments that are 44.7 percent less diverse, or substantially more segregated, in terms of their Black–White population mix...” [6]. The further reveals that traditional racial hierarchy segregation exists at a higher rate among black and whites than Asian-white and Hispanic-whites. This level of segregation has a significant impact on the socio-economic gap between African Americans and the white Americans as shown in the graphical presentation below:.

Figure1. Source: McIntosh et al.



### 3. Determinants of Racial Segregation

#### 3.1 Racial Policies

The civil rights movement intended to abolish segregation and worked for the enjoyment of public spaces and right to education. But over 50 years since these movements, segregation is still prevalent in many of the country’s metropolitan areas. Many people attribute the instances of racial and residential segregation in the US to private prejudices. However, a closer examination of the different policies that eventually created a segregated American society

shows otherwise. The racial segregation in the American society results from government policies that created a racial pattern in many parts of the country. Analyst trace this issue to the long history of state, local and federal policies that supported segregation.

Initially, there was the housing separation by race which officially started in Baltimore, the first city in the US that passed a zoning ordinance in 1910 for the purpose of separating people based on race [7]. The policies that followed “perpetuate the highly restrictive residential developments” [7], which supported housing separation by land-area standards in New York in 1916. It justified the government support for residential zoning because residential zoning promoted the aim of protecting “the civic and social values of the American home” [7].

Further, there are many historical evidences that show how the government supported federal, state, and local government actions that opened housing options to white Americans while keeping it closed to African Americans [8]. Housing segregation is the outcome of government policies that divided the American communities and prevented African Americans from integrating with the white neighborhoods. An example of this is the Federal Housing Administration policies that supported white working-class families to purchase single-family suburban homes, while averting African American families from having the same privilege. Historical evidences show that in the early 1930s, both white and black working-class families settled in many of the US urban neighborhoods. However, these previously integrated neighborhoods became segregated with President Roosevelt’s New Deal Program in 1933. While there are several factors that contributed to the segregation, most of it is “government policies that ensured that African Americans and whites would not live amongst each other” [9]. These policies were effective in segregating the black and white neighborhoods for their consistency in the federal, state, and local levels..

#### 3.2 Income Inequality

Income inequality keeps neighborhood divided, as many low-income minorities cannot afford to live in places where white people live. Previous studies show how family income and economic resources shape where families live, which makes income inequality a factor that contribute to residential segregation. When and where income inequality is higher, income

segregation is higher [10]. The high-income households have the resources to pay and live in high-income neighborhoods, while the low-income households have a limited housing option. In her examination of 100 major US metropolitan areas within Los Angeles and Boston, Owens noted that the increased rate of income inequality exacerbated neighborhood segregation [10]. In a similar study, Owens found that income segregation increased by about 20 percent from 1990 to 210 and the rate was nearly as twice high among families with children. According to Owens, the income inequality and segregation is troubling, especially for children, noting that these factors contribute to poor educational outcomes that perpetuates further inequality.

Historical evidences reveal that residential segregation has limited the economic options for members of minority families. This phenomenon contributed to the continuing gap in quality education, employment opportunities and wealth. Location patterns reflecting residential tendencies of black low-income families show that one-third of them live in high-poverty neighborhoods, compared to only 3% of low-income white working families [11]. Consequently, many analysts believe that the high level of segregation weakens the relative access of black Americans to better economic opportunities..

#### 4. Health

According to Hall, Iceland and Yi, the effect of “racialized residential contexts are both pernicious and pervasive: concentrating poverty and related social ills” [3]. It magnifies the existence of racial differences by reducing housing values in minority neighborhoods and eroding the quality of local public services. It not only affects various factors such as educational attainment and family stability but also the health and wellbeing of residents. Ranging from thermal inequality to higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases, the segregated neighborhood of black communities is vulnerable to more health risks than white communities.

People who live in an underprivileged and racially isolated neighborhood may result in poor a quality of life. Studies demonstrate that racial isolation is linked to numerous health risks for African Americans, who are likely to experience higher levels poor health outcomes. Researchers consider residential segregation by race as one among the fundamental factors that cause health disparities [12]. The significant impact of residential segregation to health is associated with its

ability in shaping exposures to critical health risks and the lack of protective factors. The low-income minorities in disadvantaged neighborhoods have lower educational and employment opportunities, two important factors that expose residents to unhealthy environment. These factors also encourage unhealthy behaviors and force residents to consume unhealthy foods, and engage in health damaging behaviors such as alcohol and drugs [12]. The adverse impact of residential segregation is evidenced by recent studies where it was found that in 8 out of 10 leading cause of death, African Americans have higher death rate compared to the white population [13]. An even more disconcerting report is that the rate of health disparities between the black and white population have not lessened over time.

Scholars argue that quality health care can reduce the health disparities that are seen in segregated communities. However, even the existing health care system proved inadequate in addressing the health disparities that are patterned with residential segregation.

Table1.

Table 2. Percentage of individuals reporting fair or poor health and activity limitations, by black vs white race and by household income, United States, 1997

Household income	Percent reporting activity limitations		Percent reporting fair or poor health	
	Black	White	Black	White
Poor	29.4	29.5	25.6	20.6
Near poor	20.0	20.7	19.5	14.1
Non-poor	10.7	10.7	9.6	5.7
Total	17.0	13.2	15.8	8.0

SOURCE OF DATA: Reference 1

#### 4.1 The Harms to Physical Health

The prevalence of structural racism, which is the existence of public policies and institutional practices that reinforce racial inequalities are factors that contribute to racial health disparities. Institutional policies such as residential black-white segregation and geographic separation by race limited African Americans from fully exercising their political power. It also limited their access to resources and quality health care. For example, studies in the 1950s positively linked segregation and stillbirth among both

blacks and whites residing in New York City [14]. A recent evidence article published in the International Journal on Disability and Human Development showed that “high levels of segregation were associated with increased risk of stillbirth among blacks, yet were protective for whites” [15]. Still another research based on national samples of segregation and outcomes related to stillbirth suggest blacks in highly segregated areas have worse outcomes than whites residing in similar communities [14]. These findings indicate that segregation pose high-health risks in black residents in segregated neighborhoods.

Another study suggests that racial residential segregation is a factor that leads to possible exposure to sexually transmitted disease through different mechanisms. In their study, Biellohypothesized that segregation may result in higher cases of STIs among Black persons by affecting the sexual network such as partner availability and population density [16]. Further, segregation fosters an environment that encourages sexual risk behaviors and increased risks of STI transmission [16]. This means that people in segregated communities are susceptible to higher risks of developing sexually transmitted infectious diseases. This is exacerbated by the fact that they do not receive adequate medical and health interventions from qualified health care professionals.

Further studies show socially vulnerable groups are at risks of exposure to higher levels of urban heat risks. In their research, Mitchell and Chakraborty offered the following hypothesis:

H1: Within metropolitan areas, higher levels of urban heat, as measured by an urban heat risk index (UHRI), are associated with larger proportions of racial/ethnic minorities and with lower socioeconomic status of neighborhoods.

H2: Between metropolitan areas, greater levels of racial and ethnic segregation within a metropolitan area is associated with higher exposure to urban heat, as measured by the UHRI.

The result of the study offers evidence that neighborhoods of lower socioeconomic status are at a higher risk to urban heat exposure have significantly greater exposure to urban heat. For hypothesis 1, an examination of the variables reveals a consistent association between the Urban Heat Risks, lower income, home ownership, and education levels across

the metropolitan statistical areas [17]. For hypothesis 2, (Mitchell and Chakraborty) determined that “greater levels of segregation in at least one of the five indicators were associated with greater levels of exposure for each racial/ethnic group” [17]. Therefore, factors such as lower socioeconomic status, as determined by homeownership, income and education are predictors of higher risks of heat exposure.

## 4.2 The Harms to Mental Health

Racial discrimination and residential segregation contribute to many health issues, including mental health. A study conducted in a Houston area shows that “both black and Latino segregation are positively related to perceived neighborhood disorder” [18]. The neighborhood disorder may have an adverse impact on the growth and development of young people and the wellbeing of the community residents. Kotecki, Kindig and Gennuso explained that the increased health disparities between Black and White children and youth residential is linked to the increased level of segregation [19]. According to Woo, Fan, Tran and Takeuchi, racial residential segregation increases the psychological problems associated with racial discrimination [20]. The anxiety provoking nature of the environment increases the risks of developing mental disorders. For instance, a study conducted in Ireland reveals that the social, psychological and environmental issues within a community increases the likelihood of taking in anxiolytic medication [21]. These studies suggest the importance of adopting and implementing policies that will protect minorities from the psychological burden of discrimination.

## 5. Education

Residential segregation caused the segregation of schools and is a central factor in raising racial differences in accessing quality of education. In most American households and communities, the family residence determines the public school that children can attend. Note that the local government controls the public education funding, so community resources are an important factor that determine the quality schools within the neighborhood. Thus, there is a strong causative relationship between residential segregation and the quality of education. The fact is that public schools with high domination of blacks and Hispanics have a higher number of poor children [13]. While there are many poor white families in the country, they live throughout communities, with many of them living in desirable residential areas.

Recent research reveals evidence that higher spending in education raises the student’s educational attainment

and economic prospects [10]. However, living in harsher conditions in these segregated communities, many black minorities have limited choice and face many obstacles to quality education. Theories of residential segregation suggest that this phenomenon result in educational inequality because of limited educational resource in families and educational institutions. According to Quillian, “income inequality in the income level of neighborhood contexts will contribute to increased inequality in educational outcomes” [22]. This is validated in another study, which shows that \$1000 added to income among low-income parents has a corresponding 4 to 7 percent standard deviation increase in their children’s test scores [10]. This shows that children living in low-income communities are at a disadvantaged to access quality education, because parents have fewer resources to invest in their children’s education.

In addition, income segregation in the community affect the school districts because a significant amount of school funding is derived from local revenues, such as the district property tax. This means that districts with higher income have greater resources for the educational needs of their students compared to districts with lower income. While state and federal funding help in either partially or wholly offsetting these resource inequalities, many states still suffer from inadequate funding. Studies show that, “income segregation creates concentrations of very-low-income students” [10] and there are only a few states that have adequate compensatory funding to provide quality educational resources for low-income districts. Inadequate funding and resources in low-income districts create inequalities as showed by test score gaps between students of low-income and high-income districts.

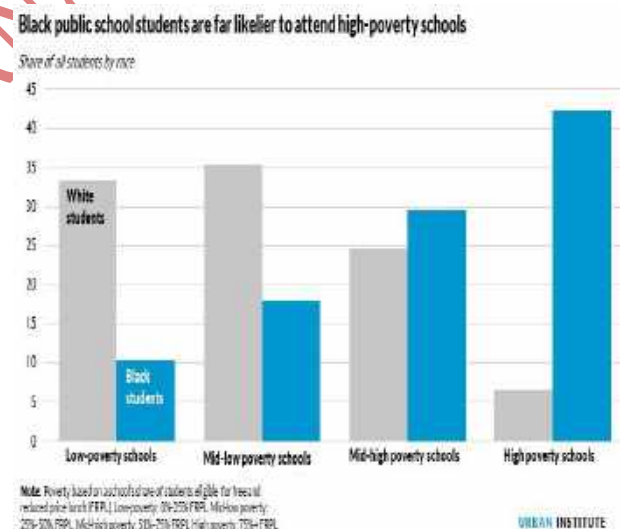
Racial segregation is a factor that contributes to inequality in neighborhood, where white families typically live in safer and child-friendly neighborhoods than their minority counterparts. Neighborhoods play a significant role in children’s welfare and development. Several studies provide evidence on the effect of neighborhood context in children’s wellbeing. For example, studies show that growing up in a disadvantaged neighborhood has a negative impact on educational performance [10]. An impoverished neighborhood is also a factor that contributes to higher rates of teen pregnancy, drug use, and diminished cognitive and psychological well-being. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to whether children experience higher residential segregation, and thus more inequality in their neighborhood contexts, than adults.

A study conducted in 2000 with regards to the estimate of segregation using an exposure and an evenness index reveals that minority children have fewer rate of

exposure to white children compared to the rate of exposure of minority adults to white adults. In the same study, it was found that children are “sorted by race more unevenly than adults across neighborhoods” [10]. This means that in contrast to children living in communities in larger metropolitan area, children in disadvantaged communities live in less diverse communities. Consequently, this factor has had a significant impact on racial segregation in the school context.

Residential and school segregation are factors that independently affect academic achievement. Studies reveal that school segregation declined in recent years, with the even representation of black and white students across schools. However, Figure 2 shows the high prevalence of school segregation and the likelihood of African American students to attend high-poverty schools than white students.

**Figure 2. Black public school students are far likelier to attend high-poverty schools. Source: Urban Institute**



According to Logan and Burdick-Will, factors such as race, poverty levels and school’s charter status affect students’ test scores [23]. Parents who understand that the schools within their district underperform in terms of quality of education may want to find a better alternative for their children. However, this is not always the case for many of the parents in poor neighborhoods. The lack of resources to enroll in quality schools can have a detrimental impact on their children. Racial segregation has a significant implication on students’ educational outcome. The fact is that minority students attend schools in high-poverty

communities with low-performing schools. This results in the gap in educational achievement, as white students attend high-performing schools in more affluent communities. The reason for the discrepancies was that the schools with many students from the minorities have less experienced and less qualified teachers [24]. Further, schools that serve low-income and segregated communities offer lesser challenging courses than those that are in more affluent areas. The findings suggest that more than the poverty status of a student, the concentration of poverty in schools is a pervasive determining factor of a student's learning outcome and achievement.

## 6. Discussion

While the Civil Rights Movement resulted in the legal prohibition of racial discrimination and residential segregation, these issues remain persistent in the United States. Recent federal housing policies are implemented to mitigate the impact of housing segregation, but this problem remains stubbornly persistent. The implication of recent research shows that while many people claim that the residential segregation between black and white families has narrowed overtime, this remains a persistent problem throughout the country. The studies show that residential segregation limits the social and economic prospects of an individual. Many neighborhoods in the United States are segregated, not because people refuse to eradicate it, but because of factors such as policies, barriers and deep-seated preferences.

The residential segregation of African Americans from the whites is one source of the factors that contribute to inequality. It strengthens the existing wealth gap, while excluding the black minorities from accessing opportunities that can help them improve their lives. Residential segregation leads to income inequality as validated in studies where it was found that income has very much unchanged among black families in segregated neighborhoods. Further readings show that on the average, black household income is 42% lower than the white household income [25]. The black minorities who live in racially segregated communities disproportionately experience many issues including income inequality, low-quality education and higher health risks among others.

A closer examination of different literatures reveals that minorities in segregated neighborhoods have difficulty finding better-paying jobs, they are more likely to suffer from health diseases and have lesser

access to quality education. The studies offer a good reason to believe that residential segregation put many black minority families at a disadvantaged position. The segregated neighborhood patterns separating the black minorities from the whites results to continuing employment, education and income gaps. In addition, it also creates a divide that prevents black minorities from accessing better employment and economic opportunities. As shown in many studies, there are various factors that prevented African Americans to live in segregated communities. Addressing the continuing issue on residential segregation requires a closer examination of the factors that contribute to its persistence.

Resolving the continuing problem about residential segregation requires addressing the deep-seated legacy of discrimination and racial segregation. We recognized that many people in the country do not favor segregation; however, it helps to know and acknowledge the root cause of the problem. Acknowledging that housing segregation remains a pervasive problem in the United States can help decision-makers know the programs that can minimize this issue and its impact on the affected minorities. The failure of the government to address the problem can exacerbate the black families' living condition. For example, it prevents them from improving their lives through better education and improved economic prospect, thus resulting in a continuing segregation-driven income and wealth gap. The limited ability to accumulate wealth is an important factor that influences many facets of family life, from the parents' ability to provide for the family, financing their children's education and saving for themselves.

The pervasive racial segregation steers many African American families from affluent neighborhoods. The high-income families can afford to live in better and safer neighborhoods with quality amenities and quality public schools. Still, some middle-class black families live in communities suffering from concentrated poverty. As indicted in the studies, even the middle class African American families send their children in low-performing schools than are low-income white parents. While public school choice policies allow students to sidestep residential segregation and choose a public school to attend to, there are many of them who cannot take advantage of this option. The reason is that their residential and economic circumstances forced many poor African American students to attend a public school within the neighborhood. The

incapacity of low-income students to attend public schools of their choice limits their learning prospect. We base this on the findings that students in better performing schools reported higher test scores than students in low-performing schools.

The reduction of residential segregation may result to a better outcome for African American families. The black minorities have better economic opportunities, income, education and health when they live in moderately segregated metropolitan area. We can attribute the logic behind the better outcome to the fact that moderately segregated metropolitan communities provide black minorities with better network and amenities.

## 7. Conclusion

Given the various evidences validating the risks of living in high-poverty minority neighborhoods, it is important for policymakers to develop policies to specifically assist low-income working families. However, this also requires taking into account that well-meaning policies and programs cannot address the specific concerns unless the realities of the minority groups and residential patterns are taken into account. For example, minority low-income families in poor neighborhoods have different needs from the minorities who live in affluent communities. Minorities in poor neighborhoods need support to seek better employment, quality education, improved healthcare.

Public policies can play a significant role in addressing residential segregation and locational disparities. For example, policymakers can adopt programs to compensate for location discrepancies, such as investing in services and resources for the poor and minority neighborhoods. Sometimes, they can also help minority families to gain a housing access to better neighborhoods through housing and relocation help programs. By directly knowing and addressing the barriers to residential segregation, policymakers are in a better position to help minorities in segregated communities.

While it is almost impossible to resolve the issue on residential segregation, the government can help by adopting policies and programs that explicitly compensate for the existing neighborhood disparities. A particular issue that requires immediate attention is the delivery of services to the disadvantaged communities. For example, school districts that are determined to be less prepared in delivering quality

education may benefit with programs that aim to increase funding and resources.

Another important consideration to reduce the problem of housing segregation is the expansions of policies promoting housing mobility. The goal is to help minority families to live in neighborhoods that will give them better opportunities to improve their lives, such as better jobs for family members, and quality education for the children. Note that a factor that prevents black minorities from accessing affluent neighborhoods is their limited income capacity and financial resource. Policy makers can help them through the promotion of programs to give minority families a chance to live in a neighborhood of their choice. This may include the mobilization of minorities through the help of community leaders. The support provided to the poor members of the black minority can help them circumvent the limiting impact of housing segregation.

The promotion of fair housing policies will pave way for minorities to live in high-quality communities. This is beneficial, not only to them as families, but to the community and the country. Access to better economic opportunities and quality education is beneficial as it allows every member of the society to enjoy the things that are best in the United States of America.

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