

What Would a New Kerner Commission Conclude Today?

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In the aftermath of deadly race riots in 1968, the Kerner Commission famously warned that the United States was “moving toward two societies, one Black, one white—separate and unequal.”¹ Was the Kerner Commission warning prophetic? Or should we be more impressed by the progress made over the half century since the report?

The policy response to the race riots, the Kerner Commission, and the activism of the civil rights movement *might* be characterized as robust. In the 50 years since the Kerner Commission report was released, many policies have been implemented and many laws have been passed—most notably the Fair Housing Act—to address racial segregation and inner-city poverty. While civil rights laws have been unevenly enforced and anti-poverty initiatives have been underfunded, we have arguably avoided the bleakest version of the commission’s prediction. Residential segregation between Black and non-Hispanic white individuals has declined in most metropolitan areas, and neighborhoods with zero African-American residents have become a rarity. Gains in employment and income have resulted in a substantial Black middle class.²

That said, a half century is a very long time in our country’s history, and it’s hard to be impressed by these successes, especially given the new and powerful threats in play. The purpose of this article is to show that the decline in racial segregation—while real—is not as large as some scholars have argued. I will also show that economic segregation is rising and that the concentration of poverty, which lies at the intersection of race and class segregation, has returned to levels not seen since the 1990s. And I will show that Black residents, even those who are affluent, are still profoundly segregated from affluent white individuals. Taken together, these spatial patterns of neighborhood differentiation have troubling implications for equality of opportunity and social mobility. The key conclusion: The decline in segregation between Black and white residents, while not trivial, is essentially undermined by these countervailing trends.

How has racial segregation changed over time?

Should we be impressed by the well-known declines in racial segregation? The short answer: It depends on how you look at it. Edward Glaeser and Jacob Vigdor³ calculated the dissimilarity index⁴ for Black individuals compared with everyone else and found declines in segregation so large that they declared the United States had reached “the end of the segregated century.”

This conclusion is too strong. The reason for studying segregation in the first place is that the spatial isolation of a disadvantaged minority group from an advantaged majority group has implications for the ability of the disadvantaged group to access the neighborhood amenities, resources, and opportunities available to the advantaged group. The simple dissimilarity index, as presented by Glaeser and Vigdor, treats non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics, Asians, and others as if they had access to the same resources, which they clearly do not. If we want to understand minority group access to the especially abundant opportunities that typically obtain in non-Hispanic white neighborhoods, we need to focus on the segregation of each minority group from non-Hispanic white residents.

This is the purpose of Figure 1. The approach taken here is to compare the average segregation score for all 384 metropolitan areas in the United States using two approaches: a Black–non-Black approach (which lumps together a very diverse non-Black population), and a Black–white approach (which speaks more directly to access to opportunity). The results are weighted by total metropolitan population in each year.⁵

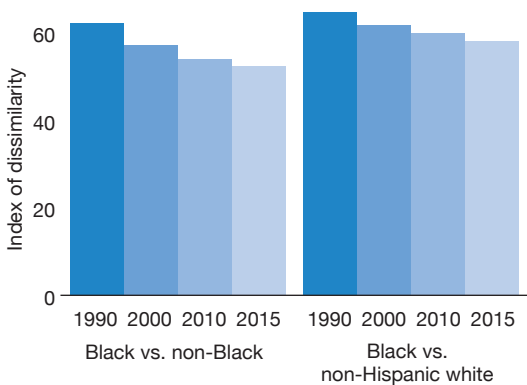
What do we find? The headline result is that Black residential segregation from non-Hispanic white individuals has declined much less than Black segregation from other non-Black groups. The starting point for both types of segregation is about the same: Black–white segregation (64.4) and Black–non-Black segregation (62.2) are not that different in 1990. Thereafter, both types of segregation decline over time, but the decline in Black–non-Black segregation is much faster (-10.2 percentage points compared with -6.3).

Why are there different rates of decline? During this period, the proportion of metropolitan area residents who were neither non-Hispanic white nor Black nearly tripled, from 9.9 percent in 1970 to 28.3 percent by 2015.⁶ These new residents, many of them Asian or Hispanic immigrants, often settled in neighborhoods with

more affordable housing in proximity to existing African-American communities. The decrease in the Black–non-Black index has been driven in large part by these changes. While the decline in segregation between African-Americans and Hispanics, particularly recently arrived immigrants, is an interesting phenomenon, it does not address the issue of Black access to the opportunities found in predominantly white neighborhoods. Did Black residents secure more opportunities, in other words, when immigrants moved into the relatively inexpensive neighborhoods near them? Probably not.

Another important aspect of the racial segregation of white and Black residents is that it is highest in those metropolitan areas where Black individuals tend to live. Figure 2 shows this relationship by graphing the dissimilarity index against the log of Black population in 2015. While the lower levels of segregation in smaller metropolitan areas are notable, it remains the case that most Black residents still live in highly segregated metropolitan areas. In the most recent data (2013–2017), about one-fourth of Black residents lived in metropolitan areas with segregation levels of 70 or higher, and nearly half lived in areas where levels were 60 or higher.

Figure 1. Black–non-Black segregation has declined much faster than Black–white segregation since 1990.



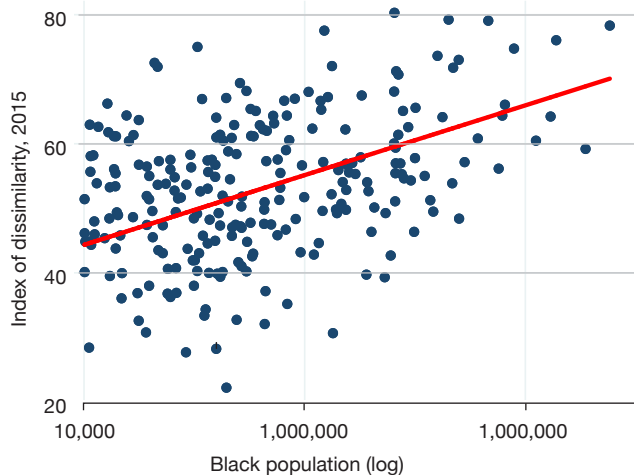
Note: Average of 384 metropolitan areas, weighted by metropolitan population in each year.
Sources: 1990: Census; 2000: Census; 2010: American Community Survey (ACS) 2008–2012; 2015: ACS 2013–2017.

How has economic segregation changed over time?

Race is not the only dividing line in metropolitan neighborhoods. If the Kerner Commission reconvened now, it would no doubt emphasize that metropolitan neighborhoods are becoming ever more segregated by income, a development that countervails some of the (modest) declines in racial segregation. In understanding this development, the first point to be made is the obvious one that neighborhoods differ dramatically in such amenities as housing quality, schools, parks, shopping, and related services. The well-off neighborhoods of course tend to have the best amenities. When the poor increasingly live with the poor and the affluent increasingly live with the affluent, it thus means that access to neighborhood amenities comes to depend more on family income.

In a given metropolitan area, the potential for neighborhoods to be differentiated in this way depends, in part, on the overall amount of household inequality within the area. The more inequality there is in the household income distribution in a metropolitan area, the greater the potential for neighborhoods within that area to be unequal. So household inequality is a useful place to start our analysis.

Figure 2. Black residents are most segregated from non-Hispanic white residents in metropolitan areas with large Black populations.



Source: ACS 2013–2017; calculations by author.

Because much research has documented the national rise in household income inequality,⁷ it would be expected that metropolitan areas have grown more unequal as well.⁸ This is indeed what has been found: Two key indicators of inequality—the Gini coefficient and the Theil index—suggest that household inequality grew by 13 percent (Gini) to 17 percent (Thiel) within metropolitan areas since 1970.⁹

How is this increased household inequality affecting the extent to which neighborhoods are unequal? The extent of economic segregation depends on how much of this (growing) household inequality is found *between* rather than *within* neighborhoods. If neighborhoods are very unequal, it means that households are living near others of similar economic levels and thus economic residential segregation is high. As shown in Figure 3, not only have neighborhoods become more unequal over the past four decades, they have become more unequal at a faster rate than households have.

Partly, neighborhoods became more unequal because there is now more household inequality to go around. But the fact that neighborhoods became more unequal faster than households implies that there was also a higher degree of sorting of households into neighborhoods by income level. In other words, residential economic segregation increased.¹⁰

The key implication is that, during the period since the Kerner Commission report, there's been a dramatic rise in two types of economic inequality: household inequality and neighborhood

inequality. It useful to examine next how these new developments intersect with racial inequality.

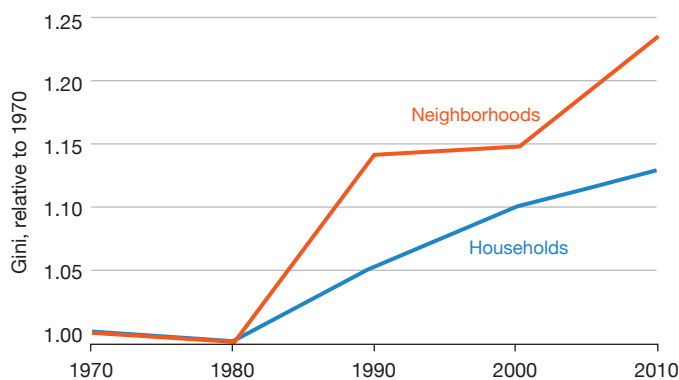
The intersection of two forms of segregation

Some economic segregation comes about just because lower-income minority groups are segregated from more affluent non-Hispanic white individuals.¹¹ However, there is also a great deal of economic segregation within racial and ethnic groups.¹² As a result, poor Black and Hispanic households are segregated not only from white households, but also from higher-income members of their own race or ethnicity. To demonstrate the combined effect of these two forms of segregation, I calculate the dissimilarity index for households with different income levels. For this analysis, households are divided into four groups by total household income: (1) less than \$25,000; (2) \$25,000 to \$49,999; (3) \$50,000 to \$99,999; and (4) more than \$100,000. For ease of presentation, I refer to the first group as “poor households,” the second group as “working class,” the third group as “middle class,” and the last group as “affluent.”¹³

As shown in the first three columns of Table 1, the amount of segregation increases as the income gap increases. Poor white households are least segregated from white working-class households (0.22) and most segregated from white affluent households (0.36). This pattern is found in all groups, but it's superimposed on a higher overall amount of segregation for minority groups. In fact, the *lowest* levels of segregation between Black income classes (poor versus working class, 0.33) is almost as high as the *most* segregated white income group pairing (poor versus affluent, 0.36). Poor Black households are quite segregated from affluent Black households, with an index of dissimilarity of 0.50. William Julius Wilson argued that middle- and higher-income households in a community constitute a “social buffer” that helps lower-income households weather economic downturns.¹⁴ Table 1 shows that poor minority households are less likely than poor white households to benefit from the presence of wealthier households of their own group.

The economic isolation of minority poor households reduces their access to high-quality education. Higher-income families, with higher than average social capital and more flexible employment hours, are more likely to take an active role in neighborhood schools via volunteering, raising funds, and participating in the

Figure 3. Neighborhood inequality grew at a faster rate than household inequality since 1970.



Note: Weighted average of 264 metropolitan areas (all available counties).

parent-teacher association.¹⁵ The most advantaged neighborhoods are those with large numbers of affluent white households. Whether these are in outer suburbs or advantaged sections of central cities, such neighborhoods often have high-performing schools, high-quality housing stock, and low levels of crime and violence. It follows that, insofar as we care about access to opportunities, it's important to measure the amount of co-residence with affluent white households.

The far-right column of Table 1 thus reports the segregation of other racial and ethnic groups of various income levels from affluent non-Hispanic white households. Poor Black households, not surprisingly, are highly segregated from affluent white households (0.79). But the income difference is not what drives this result: the segregation of affluent Black from affluent white households is 0.64, meaning that nearly two-thirds of all

affluent Black households would have to move to achieve an even distribution with affluent white households. To the extent that better-off Black families are integrating neighborhoods, they tend to move to older inner-ring suburbs with working-class white families, not wealthier white neighborhoods.¹⁶ The persistence and enduring strength of the color line cannot be denied when white households earning less than \$25,000 share neighborhoods with affluent white families far more often than do Black families making over \$100,000.

Poor Hispanic and Asian households are also highly segregated from *affluent* white households (0.71 and 0.68, respectively). The segregation of these groups from affluent white households diminishes somewhat as their income level rises, falling to 0.49 for affluent Hispanic households and 0.47 for affluent Asian households.

Table 1. Poor minority households are segregated both from white households and from better-off members of their own racial or ethnic group.

	Same racial group				Affluent non-Hispanic white
	Poor	Working class	Middle class	Affluent	
Non-Hispanic white					
Poor	0.00	0.22	0.26	0.36	0.36
Working class		0.00	0.20	0.30	0.30
Middle class			0.00	0.25	0.25
Affluent				0.00	0.00
Black					
Poor	0.00	0.33	0.42	0.50	0.79
Working class		0.00	0.35	0.42	0.76
Middle class			0.00	0.38	0.73
Affluent				0.00	0.64
Hispanic					
Poor	0.00	0.34	0.41	0.50	0.71
Working class		0.00	0.35	0.43	0.67
Middle class			0.00	0.39	0.64
Affluent				0.00	0.49
Asian					
Poor	0.00	0.48	0.52	0.57	0.68
Working class		0.00	0.47	0.51	0.65
Middle class			0.00	0.46	0.62
Affluent				0.00	0.47

Note: Includes all metropolitan areas, weighted by metropolitan population.
Source: ACS 2013–2017.

Nevertheless, affluent Hispanic and Asian households are still much less likely than poor white households to live with affluent whites.

Concentration of poverty

Poor minority households, segregated both from white residents and from better-off members of their own racial or ethnic group, may end up isolated in very high-poverty neighborhoods—inner-city ghettos, barrios, and emerging pockets of poverty in older inner-ring suburbs. The term “concentration of poverty” refers to the extent to which poor persons in a given metropolitan area reside in high-poverty neighborhoods. Such individuals suffer the double burden of inadequate family resources and neighborhoods that are disproportionately characterized by disinvestment, underperforming schools, and other social ills.¹⁷

Between 1990 and 2000, the population living in high-poverty neighborhoods in the United States declined substantially, from 9.6 million to 7.2 million (see Figure 4).¹⁸ The decrease likely reflected many factors, including the strong economy of the 1990s, changes in housing policy toward decentralized public housing and vouchers, expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and other policy changes. But by 2007, the population of high-poverty neighborhoods had increased substantially, nearly returning to the 1990 level. In the 2010–2014 data, fully reflecting post-recession years, the population of high-poverty ghettos, barrios, and slums reached 14.5 million, doubling

the 2000 level. More recently, as the national economy has recovered, the total population living in concentrated poverty fell to 11.2 million in the latest available data, still substantially higher than the 2000 level.

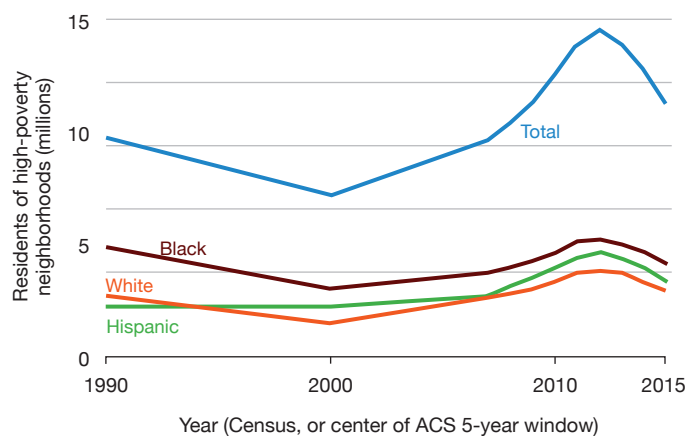
Implications: Permanent inequality

Recent research has only strengthened the case that social and economic isolation caused by racial and economic segregation harms the residents of those neighborhoods.¹⁹ While race is still the most conspicuous dividing line, the story of metropolitan neighborhoods is no longer a simple story of Black and white. Neighborhoods are more unequal than ever because growing income inequality and increasing economic segregation are playing out against the backdrop of racially segregated neighborhoods. The decline in segregation between Black and white residents, while not trivial, is effectively rendered irrelevant by these countervailing trends. Segregation has always meant exclusion from the dominant group’s neighborhoods and therefore high-performing schools and other public resources. But given the increase in economic segregation, the stakes are even higher for those groups that find themselves segregated by race or ethnicity. A Kerner Commission writing today would not focus on race alone, but on the vastly different worlds inhabited by low-income minorities and virtually everyone else, including the white poor.

The failure to address these disparities, especially given the consequences for children, is tantamount to accepting permanent inequality. Chetty et al. conclude that “blacks and whites are now in a steady-state where the black-white income gap is due almost entirely to differences in rates of intergenerational mobility.”²⁰ The vastly unequal neighborhoods that many Black children experience impede social mobility through many channels, while white children—even when poor—rarely experience similar levels of neighborhood disadvantage. The inequality of neighborhood contexts therefore serves to sustain and replicate racial inequality.

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Figure 4. There are 11.2 million Americans living in high-poverty neighborhoods.



Sources: Census 1990, 2000; ACS 2005–2009 through 2013–2017.

The Winter 2019 edition of Pathways was delayed in publication and is based on articles written in 2018.

Notes

1. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. 1968. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* ("The Kerner Report"). New York: Bantam Books.
2. Lacy, Karyn. 2007. *Blue-Chip Black: Race, Class, and Status in the New Black Middle Class*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
3. Glaeser, Edward L., and Jacob L. Vigdor. 2012. "The End of the Segregated Century: Racial Separation in America's Neighborhoods, 1890–2010." Civic Report 66. New York, NY: Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. See also Cutler, David M., Edward L. Glaeser, and Jacob L. Vigdor. 1999. "The Rise and Decline of the American Ghetto." *Journal of Political Economy* 107(3), 455–506.
4. The Index of Dissimilarity (D), the most commonly used measure of segregation, assesses the evenness of the distribution of two groups across neighborhoods. A value of 0 means the two groups are present in equal proportions in every neighborhood, and 100 means the two groups live in entirely separate neighborhoods. Values in between reflect the percentage of one (or the other) that would have to move to achieve perfect integration. See Duncan, Otis Dudley, and Beverly Duncan. 1955. "A Methodological Analysis of Segregation Indexes." *American Sociological Review* 20(2), 210–217. In general, segregation levels of 30 or below are considered low, 30 to 60 are considered moderate, and values above 60 are considered high. See Kantrowitz, Nathan. 1973. *Ethnic and Racial Segregation in the New York Metropolis*. New York: Praeger.
5. All metropolitan areas and metropolitan divisions, with boundaries defined as of 2010, are included. For a detailed discussion of the data, metropolitan area definitions, and other methodological issues, see Jargowsky, Paul A. 2018. "The Persistence of Segregation in the 21st Century." Social Science Research Network Scholarly Paper ID 3184538.
6. After 2000, data at the neighborhood level are available only in the American Community Survey (ACS). Each year, a file is released summarizing 60 monthly surveys covering a five-year window. For each release, there is a four-year overlap with the previous file, so the values calculated are a type of moving average. For more recent years, the figure includes the data from the 2008–2012 and 2013–2017 ACS files; these values are plotted at the midpoints of the periods covered. For example, "2015" in the text and figure refers to data from ACS 2013–2017.
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8. Acs, Gregory, Rolf Pendall, Mark Treskon, and Amy Khare. 2017. "The Costs of Segregation: National Trends and the Case of Chicago, 1990–2010." Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center, Urban Institute, and the Metropolitan Planning Council. See also Owens, Ann. 2016. "Inequality in Children's Contexts: Income Segregation of Households with and Without Children." *American Sociological Review* 81(3), 549–574.
9. The figures are averages for 264 metropolitan areas that could be tracked over time. See Jargowsky, Paul A., and Christopher A. Wheeler. 2017. "Economic Segregation in US Metropolitan Areas, 1970–2010." 21st Century Cities Initiative, Johns Hopkins University.
10. Other approaches to measuring economic segregation support the same conclusion. See Owens, 2016 and Reardon, Sean F., and Kendra Bischoff. 2011. "Income Inequality and Income Segregation." *American Journal of Sociology* 116(4), 1092–1153. See also Watson, Tara. 2009. "Inequality and the Measurement of Residential Segregation by Income in American Neighborhoods." *Review of Income and Wealth* 55(3), 820–844.
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