# Is Resegregation Real?

*By*

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## Introduction

Analysis by the Civil Rights Project has shown that the isolation of Latino and black students from white students in public schools has substantially increased since the l980s. These findings have been criticized recently in a report by the Mumford Center at the University at Albany, "Resegregation in American Public Schools? Not in the 1990s" [1] and in Abigail and Stephen Thernstrom's book*, No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*.[2] The Mumford report argues that the increased isolation is not caused by public policy but by demographic trends and hence, "it is misleading to label these trends as resegregation." The Thernstroms claim that "black and white students in our public schools have become much less separated over the past thirty years or so." Furthermore, they argue that the existing racial imbalance in schools should come as no surprise given the reality of residential preferences and differences in family income.[3] This paper seeks to address these criticisms, clarify our findings, and reaffirm our conclusion that black and Latino isolation has indeed increased, not only because of demographic trends but also because of public policy changes.

The first vital point is that no one disputes the facts that black and Latino students are in schools with substantially fewer whites than was the case in late 1980s or that these schools are also highly segregated by poverty. All acknowledged that these are facts. Our reports give primary attention to trends of increasing isolation of black and Latino students from white students. They are computed from data officially collected from the states and school districts and distributed by the federal government in the Common Core of Education Statistics. These patterns of increasing isolation happened and have not been challenged. What has been called into question is what to call this pattern and what caused both the long trend of *desegregation* for black students and the consistent increase in *segregation* since the late 1980s.

Because there are many dimensions to segregation, any single measure will not fully capture the nuances and complexity of the educational experiences of students, regardless of their race. We chose the measures we use not because they are the only measures that convey significant information but because we believe they best describe the trends in the dimensions of educational experience that have potential benefits for minority children.[4] There is no theory on desegregation that does not require at least examining the potential for significant levels of interracial contact, and there is a great deal of research that suggests that isolation in high poverty schools is related to many forms of educational

[1] Logan, J. (2004) *Resegregation in American Public Schools? Not in the 1990s*. Albany, NY: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research.
[2] Thernstrom, A. and Thernstrom, S. (2003). *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 174.
[3] *Ibid*, p. 173.
[4] For a more detailed description of the measures, see discussion *infra*.

disadvantage.[5] In addition, there is a relationship between ethnic and poverty isolation for Latinos and Asians and linguistic isolation, another form of disadvantage.[6] We believe that showing the percentage of students of each racial group in predominantly white and intensely segregated schools and the changing level of exposure for black and Latino students to white students offer important information on the potential for desegregation and interracial contact.

The other measures most frequently used for measuring desegregation are usually measures of the randomness of distribution of various racial and ethnic groups of students within a given unit of analysis. These measures have a long background in sociological studies and some of our studies have reported them. The basic problem with them from an educational and community perspective is that they have no common meaning and a school district can look very good on these measures and still be segregated. In a 90% nonwhite school district, for example, a 97% nonwhite school would look integrated on this measure and a 50-50 school would look segregated. In a heavily white district, like many of our outer suburbs, such measures would describe a virtually all-white school as very highly integrated and one that brought in 35% minority children from the city as relatively far more segregated. Taken out of context, these numbers can be misleading.

The key here is the assumption by some readers that when we report segregation we are implying causation and asserting that there is some kind of immediately practicable remedy. In fact, we use segregation as a description of the fact of racial separation. Since there has been a substantial level of policy based desegregation achieved only for the Southern and Border states and occasional communities elsewhere, it is in such settings that we describe the policy and legal dimensions of these trends.

## Issues Raised by the Mumford Center

The Mumford study presents an alternative explanation to the findings of The Civil Rights Project (CRP) report on school resegregation, “A Multiracial Society with Segregated Schools: Are We Losing the Dream?” According to the Mumford report, it is “misleading to label these trends resegregation.”[7] Instead, the authors attribute the shift from majority-white schools to majority-minority schools by students of all races to the “changing composition of the national student population, not an increasing separation

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[5] Natriello, G., McDill, E.L. & Pallas, A.M. (1990). *Schooling Disadvantaged Children: Racing Against Catastrophe.* New York, NY: Teachers College Press; Haveman, R. and Wolfe, B. (1994). *Succeeding Generations: On the Effects of Investments in Children*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; Schellenberg, S. (1999). “Concentration of Poverty and the Ongoing Need for Title I” in Orfield and DeBray, eds., *Hard Work for Good Schools*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project, p. 130-146; Balfanz, R. and Legter, N. “How Many Central City High Schools Have a Severe Dropout Problem, Where Are They Located, and Who Attends Them?” Paper presented at Dropouts in America Conference, Harvard University, January 13, 2001.

[6] Lee, C. (2004). *Racial Segregation and Educational Outcomes in Metropolitan Boston*. Cambridge: The Civil Rights Project; Logan, J. (2003). *Segregation in Neighborhoods and Schools: Impact on Minority Children in the Boston Region*. Albany, NY: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research. p. 1.

[7] Logan, J. (2004). *Resegregation in American Public Schools? Not in the 1990s.* Albany, NY: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research. p. 1.

between white and minority students."[8] There are two parts to this argument: one, that changing demographics is the primary driving factor behind segregation trends and two, that "resegregation" should be defined as increasing polarization among students of different races. We believe that the conclusion in the Mumford study "--that resegregation has not occurred"--is largely an assertion about what measure of segregation is most useful and at what level of analysis. Certainly, the Mumford Center itself has produced several reports using differing measures of segregation, many of which share our findings and conclusions.[9]

## The Importance of Demographic Changes

We of course fully acknowledge the importance of thinking about demographics—it is the first portion of virtually all of our reports. However, to attribute changes in segregation levels to demographic simplifies the dynamics of segregation. In fact, an earlier Mumford study, released in 2002, "Choosing Segregation: Racial Imbalance in American Public Schools, 1990-2000" found that schools are becoming more segregated even as residential segregation may be slightly declining for black students. The authors found that the national average level of segregation of black elementary children from white elementary children showed "a 2-point increase in school segregation compared to 1989-90, a small shift but especially significant when …residential segregation was declining by 3 or 4 points in the same period."[10] This study goes on to say that "in many places there has been a clear retreat from efforts to desegregate black schoolchildren" so that when the authors compared neighborhoods in which there had been major policy initiatives addressing racial imbalance in schools, they found that "increased school segregation in these cases did not result from changes in where children lived.[11] It was caused by "changes in policies that once worked effectively to reduce school segregation, but that were reversed in the 1990s."[12] In other words, the 2002 Mumford study concludes decisively that increasing school segregation was the direct result of policies that were reversed in the 1990s.

The 2002 Mumford study results are not much different from the results from the CRP study "Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare?" which found that, for black students in the South, where desegregation orders were implemented, the latest decade has seen a rollback of the progress made from the late 1960s to the 1980s.[13] Since 1990, the percent of black students attending majority-minority schools (more than 50% minority) nationwide has increased from 66% to 72% and from 34% to 38% in intensely-segregated-minority schools (more than 90% minority).[14]

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[8] *Ibid*, p.13.
[9] See, for example, Logan, J. (2002) *Choosing Segregation: Racial Imbalance in American Public Schools, 1990-2000*. Albany, NY: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research.
[10] *Ibid*, p. 4.
[11] *Ibid*, p. 4.
[12] *Ibid*, p. 5
[13] Orfield, G., and Lee, C. (2004). *Brown at 50: King's Dream or Plessy's Nightmare?* Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project.
[14] *Ibid*, p.20.

While it is true, as the Mumford study suggests, that the share of students in majority-white schools has dropped for all races due to demographic changes in the student population, it is also clear that, after Latinos (who never experienced a serious desegregation effort), the largest drop occurred for black students in the South and the Border states, who were the most affected by the changing segregation policies in the 1990s (Table 1). In the South, where black students experienced substantial desegregation and was very clearly policy related, there was a ten percentage point difference in the percent of black students in majority white schools. During the same period, the percent of white and Latino students attending these schools dropped by less than six percentage points.

**Table 1: Percentage of Students in Majority White Schools, By Race and Region**

| | %White in Majority White Schools | %Black in Majority White School | %Latino in Majority White Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1991** | | | |
| West | 86 | 31 | 26 |
| Border | 96 | 38 | 60 |
| Midwest | 97 | 35 | 60 |
| South | 86 | 36 | 22 |
| Northeast | 96 | 25 | 22 |
| **2002** | | | |
| West | 80 | 23 | 17 |
| Border | 93 | 28 | 42 |
| Midwest | 96 | 31 | 48 |
| South | 80 | 26 | 20 |
| Northeast | 94 | 22 | 22 |
| **Percent Change** | | | |
| West | -6 | -7 | -9 |
| Border | -3 | -10 | -18 |
| Midwest | -1 | -4 | -12 |
| South | -5 | -10 | -2 |
| Northeast | -2 | -3 | 0 |

*Source: 1991-02 and 2002-3 NCES Common Core of Data*

When we look at the percentage of students attending majority-minority schools, we find that while white, black, and Latino students are attending more majority-minority schools in 2002 than in 1991, the largest increases have been experienced by black students in the South and Latino students in all regions (Table 2). The share of black students in majority-minority schools increased by ten percentage points, followed by five percentage points for white students and two percentage points for Latino students. The

2004 Mumford Study attributes these new patterns solely to the drop in white share of enrollment. In doing so, it oversimplifies the complexity of the situation and ignores one of the CRP report's chief findings: that school segregation, particularly in the South, has risen dramatically in the aftermath of court orders dismantling desegregation plans, especially for black students. While it is clear that demographic changes such as increases in Latino and Asian enrollment might contribute to greater shares of all students attending majority-minority schools, attributing all these changes to demography does not explain the disparate impact of these changes on certain groups versus others.

**Table 2: Percentage of Students in Majority Minority Schools, By Race and Region**

| | %White in Majority Minority Schools | %Black in Majority Minority Schools | %Latino in Majority Minority Schools |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1991** | | | |
| West | 14 | 69 | 74 |
| Border | 4 | 62 | 40 |
| Midwest | 3 | 65 | 40 |
| South | 14 | 64 | 78 |
| Northeast | 4 | 75 | 78 |
| **2002** | | | |
| West | 20 | 77 | 83 |
| Border | 7 | 71 | 58 |
| Midwest | 4 | 69 | 52 |
| South | 19 | 74 | 80 |
| Northeast | 6 | 78 | 78 |
| **Percent Change** | | | |
| West | 6 | 8 | 9 |
| Border | 3 | 10 | 18 |
| Midwest | 1 | 5 | 12 |
| South | 5 | 10 | 2 |
| Northeast | 2 | 3 | 0 |

*Source: 1991-02 and 2002-3 NCES Common Core of Data*

## Choosing Meaningful Measures of Segregation

Researchers studying school segregation choose not only what geographic levels to compare but also which of many measures of segregation to use. We believe that some measures of segregation, particularly measures of "randomness of distribution" like the Dissimilarity Index, are interesting for sociological purposes as measures of proportionality but often have very little utility in describing the educational and racial experiences of students, since in heavily minority or overwhelmingly white districts they

report a school with very little interracial contact as being more desegregated than a school with very high levels of interracial enrollment. Therefore, we focus more on measures of exposure of students to students of other races, either through isolation and exposure indices or by examining the changing shares of students attending schools with certain racial thresholds.

## Issues Raised by the Thernstroms

The Thernstroms state in *No Excuses* that it is "seriously misleading…to confuse racial imbalance with the legally enforced separation of the races."[15] We could not agree more and furthermore, we make no such claim. In fact their book mistakes our findings in a number of key aspects and we encourage readers to compare their claims with the actual reports. There has been substantial progress made with the desegregation orders that were effectively implemented and enforced in the South during the late 1960s and up to the late 1980s. To say that current segregation results from "legally enforced separation of the races" is a serious mistake. However, that students are severely segregated in their schools is a fact. It is important that as we look back on the 50th anniversary of *Brown*, that we are not only cognizant of what has been accomplished, but what has yet to be done in order to achieve equal educational opportunity for all students, regardless of their race.

### The Relationship Between Residential and School Segregation

It is important to note that the Civil Rights Projects' claims concerning policy-driven resegregation have been largely about black students in the South, since this is the only region where there was effective policy-driven desegregation in the first place. Desegregation efforts in the Northeast and Midwest were largely limited by the *Milliken v. Bradley* decision in 1974, which prevented desegregation between largely minority central city systems and largely white suburbs.

Authors of a recent study, "Integrating Neighborhoods, Segregating Schools: the Retreat from School Desegregation in the South, 1990-2000", examined the extent to which residential segregation, changes in school assignment policies, and changes in white private school enrollment have affected school segregation in the South at three different levels: states, metropolitan areas, and counties.[16] If, as the Thernstroms argue, school segregation is a reflection of residential segregation, we would expect a drop in residential segregation to result in a drop in school segregation. After examining the fifty counties with the largest black populations, Reardon and Yun found that there was increasing black/white school segregation from 1990 to 2000 despite a drop in residential segregation. Intercounty school segregation was 40 percent lower than intercounty residential segregation in 1990 compared to just 27 percent lower in 2000, even as the average county became less residentially segregated in the same period. This marked a

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[15] Thernstrom, A. and Thernstrom, S. (2003). *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 170.

[16] Reardon, S. and Yun, J. (2003). *Integrating neighborhoods, Segregating Schools: The Retreat from School Desegregation in the* South, 1990-2000. 81 N.C.L.REV.1463, p1563-1596.

one-third decline in desegregation between 1990 and 2000.[17] While one cannot entirely discount the link between residential and school segregation, these findings show that other factors besides residential segregation, such as changes in school policy, might be contributing to these increases in school segregation. In fact, when we examine districts in the South that have undergone extensive and effective desegregation orders until these districts were declared unitary, there is a clear pattern of resegregation. This is already happening in districts such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg, in which 32 percent of the district's 85 elementary schools are racially identifiable black, an increase of seven percentage points from fall of 2001 to fall of 2002.[18] In the same amount of time, 21 percent are racially identifiable white, up from 12 percent and the sum of racially balanced elementary schools dropped from 49 percent to 32 percent. It is clear that these changes are the result of policy action and that resegregation is clearly taking place in the district.

## Measuring *Inter*-District Versus *Intra*-District Segregation

Further, one must consider these trends within the broader context of the changing dynamics of segregation. The Thernstoms'"No Excuses" and the 2004 Mumford study concentrate on "within district" segregation. To the extent that white and black families live in separate school districts that are usually small and extremely fragmented (which is usually the norm outside of the South with its larger countywide districts), measuring intradistrict segregation provides a limited understanding of the current dynamics of segregation, given the patterns of segregation in large metropolitan areas in regions such as the Northeast and Midwest. In fact, the Mumford Center, in their study "The Continuing Legacy of the Brown Decision: Court Action and School Segregation, 1960-2000" (2004) argues:

"The impact of desegregation has been limited in three ways, all of which result fundamentally from the policy decision to reject inter-district remedies:

- Metropolitan-level segregation, including separation both within and between school districts, declined very little over these three decades. (*1970s-1990s)*

- White flight from districts with larger black populations has reduced the inter-racial contact generated by within-district desegregation.

- Desegregation within districts has left large disparities in poverty concentration for black and white students across districts in the same metropolitan region."

[17]Reardon, S. and Yun, J. (2003). *Integrating neighborhoods, Segregating Schools: The Retreat from School Desegregation in the* South, 1990-2000. 81 N.C.L.REV.1463, p. 1585.
[18] Mickelson, R.A. (2003). *The Academic consequences of Desegregation and Segregation: Evidence from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools*, 81 N.C.L.REV.1463, pgs. 1513-63.

## The Effects of Income Differences and Preferences on Segregation

The Thernstroms also argue that segregation is the natural result of preferences and income differences. Recent reports show that these two factors fall short of explaining the patterns of residential segregation that there are other factors at work that contribute to the dynamics of segregation we are witnessing today. The Mumford Center, in its study "Separate and Unequal: The Neighborhood Gap for Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan America" points out that economically successful blacks and Hispanics (those with incomes over $60,000) not only live in largely separate neighborhoods than do whites, they also live in poorer neighborhoods than do economically successful whites.[19] Further, the neighborhood gap between economically successful blacks and Hispanics and similar whites is almost as wide as that between blacks and Hispanics of all incomes and whites of all incomes. This gap increased over the 1990s. A survey of employers and households in four U.S. metros areas found that while the factors affecting residential segregation remain complex, people of all races "express desires for both substantial integration and a strong representation of co-ethnics."[20] Our new Boston metro studies show that it is neither preference nor economics.

In conclusion, there is strong evidence that districts where desegregation orders have been weakened or vacated show a trend towards resegregation that is over and above what would be expected by demographic changes alone. The interaction between changes in racial enrollments and school enrollment policies are essential to understanding changing patterns of school segregation and that active discrimination and unequal mortgage financing remain. Attributing the current segregation patterns to merely demographic changes or to such factors such as income differentials and residential preferences not only oversimplifies the issue, but misleads the public regarding the progress that has been done with past desegregation policies as well as the current forces that are shaping the complex dynamics of segregation and resegregation of the nation's public schools.

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[19] Logan, J. (2002). *Separate and Unequal: The Neighborhood Gap for Blacks and Hispanics in Metropolitan America.* Albany, NY: Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban and Regional Research.

[20] O'Connor, A., Tilly, C., and Bobo, L.D. eds. (2001). *Urban Inequality: Evidence from Four Cities*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, p. 263.