



How Local Policies Create and Enforce Segregation

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The quality of public goods in the United States is highly variable. Some people have access to good schools, well-paved and plowed roads, sewers that rarely overflow, public parks with playgrounds and restrooms, adequately staffed police and fire forces, and clean water, while other people do not. The quality of public services and utilities that U.S. residents experience is largely a function of the often segregated communities in which they reside. Segregation refers to the concentration of poor people and people of color in residential locations apart from wealthy, white residents. My research finds that segregation, shaped by local political processes, permits unequal access to public goods and services to persist. Despite many demographic and economic transformations, the United States remains a profoundly segregated nation.

How Local Politics Have Driven — and Continue to Maintain — Segregation

Local politics are the primary drivers of urban segregation. Since the earliest days of U.S. urban development, local governments have influenced property values and strategically allocated public goods to the benefit of white property owners. Local politics is, at its core, the politics of land use, long dominated by white property owners who seek to enhance their wealth and control the allocation of services like public education. Through land use regulation, zoning, and redevelopment planning, local governments create segregation along race and class lines.

White property owners have seen their land-use designs and control over local public goods threatened by demographic changes, shifts in political power, and higher-level government policies. When such threats appeared, white property owners expanded the scale of segregation by moving from isolated blocks to separate neighborhoods and then to suburbs divided from cities. Local politics – and population shifts – profoundly shape unequal access to public benefits and also help to polarize state and national politics.

Neither economic inequalities across racial groups nor white racial resentments sufficiently explain variation in the level of segregation across time and place. Processes driven by those most favored have again and again advantaged some residents at the great expense of others. For more than one hundred years, this process has benefited white property owners and their allies, and disadvantaged people of color and those at the economic margins. After entrenching this subdivided landscape, white property owners became free to claim that segregation was simply the result of differences in individual preferences. They decried governmental attempts to desegregate neighborhoods and spread public good as infringements upon their rights.

Tracing Deliberate Segregation

Using new data on municipal expenditures and demographic trends, my research demonstrates that since cities became modern service providers in the early 1900s, they have inequitably distributed services in ways that entrench segregation. Over time, cities started to build sewage systems and water treatment plants, began to collect garbage and light their streets, and for the first time, began to manipulate and direct the uses of land. They planned and zoned land within city limits to define where certain types of housing and buildings could be located (or not). They also decided where public amenities and nuisances would be placed. As all of this unfolded, city governments sought to protect white homeowner neighborhoods and business properties from integration, and concentrated the delivery of public goods on politically powerful constituents. These strategies resulted in persistent neighborhood-level residential segregation and inequalities in the delivery of municipal services. Later, when the federal government offered funds for urban renewal and public housing, cities utilized these processes to reinforce earlier patterns.

Where and when people of color had political voice, segregation and inequality were reduced. In the decades following World War II, the political voices of the marginalized grew louder. As people of color contested municipal elections, demanded an end to Jim Crow, and the federal government took action against segregation, the control of white property owners became increasingly uncertain. White property owners often moved to the suburbs where they could maintain political power and police the borders of their communities more easily. As a result, metropolitan segregation only changed form and scale, shifting from block to neighborhood, then from neighborhood to cities versus suburbs. During every attempt city, state, and the federal governments have made to desegregate residential areas and public goods, white homeowners have found new ways to insulate their communities.

Political Consequences — and Possibilities for Reform

Segregation has profound political consequences. In cities, segregation drives down collective expenditures and results in underfunded public goods. Segregation between cities denies excluded residents access to public goods and voting clout. Segregation encourages political polarization by stoking deep racial divisions in support for candidates and in national elections.

But the situation is not immutable. Policymakers can undo unjust systems of segregation.

- States should incorporate school districts and municipalities with an eye toward promoting integration and limiting fragmentation.
- States should build multifamily housing to encourage more efficient, dense land use – but must be vigilant to ensure that cities do not force multifamily housing into marginal neighborhoods or tight spaces. Lower-income residents can also be given housing subsidies – to allow them to move and make choices.
- If breaching segregation proves unworkable, more can be done by state governments to spread and redistribute public goods, just as many states have done for school funding.

Garnering state support for either desegregation or redistribution of public goods will require tremendous political pressure from marginalized groups and their allies – an admittedly daunting task. However, these groups may find support from businesses and residents who have been priced out of unaffordable markets. Advocacy groups, citizens' organizations, and concerned policymakers must building coalition to work for a more just and equitable desegregated society. America's future depends on their success.

Read more in Jessica Troustine, *Segregation by Design: Local Politics and Inequality in American Cities* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).