

COMMENTARY

Does Segregation Create Winners and Losers?

Residential Segregation and Inequality in Educational Attainment

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Does [segregation](#) still matter for educational inequality? Nearly fifty years after the civil rights movement, American neighborhoods and schools remain highly segregated by race and income. A longstanding concern is that segregation negatively affects the education of racial minorities and low-income students by concentrating them in the worst schools and neighborhoods. Correspondingly, many white or affluent parents worry that living in a racially or economically diverse neighborhood environment might compromise the quality of their child's education compared to a more homogeneous, advantaged environment.

[This study](#) by Northwestern University Sociology Professor [Lincoln Quillian](#), published in the journal [Social Problems](#), investigates the effects of residential segregation in creating educational "winners" and "losers" among adolescents by race and family income. His study uses a sample of more than 2,500 youth from the [Panel Study of Income Dynamics](#), a national longitudinal study, who were tracked with regular re-interviews from ages 14 to 26. He examines the educational attainment of respondents at age 26 across categories of race, family income, and the level of metropolitan segregation (a metropolitan area is a city together with its surrounding suburbs). Specifically, he incorporates the level of metropolitan segregation at age 14 into statistical models predicting high school graduation and college graduation. The models also account for individual family background, race or ethnicity, and characteristics of metropolitan areas, such as the metropolitan poverty rate and racial and ethnic composition.

The results show that for students raised in families with income below the poverty line, the chance of graduating high school was significantly lower when raised in metropolitan areas with higher levels of segregation of poor families from other families compared to less segregated areas. Similarly, Black students raised in metropolitan areas with high levels of racial residential segregation had lower rates of high school graduation than Black students raised in metropolitan areas with low levels of racial residential segregation. For poor and Black students, growing up in a metropolitan area with higher income and racial segregation (respectively) is associated with lower rates of high school graduation. These associations were statistically significant and fairly large and were robust to alternative methods of estimation.

In contrast, for youth from white and affluent backgrounds, the level of segregation in their metropolitan area of residence during adolescence had no association with graduation rates from high school or college by age 26. Whites and individuals from more affluent backgrounds did not "win" educationally from segregation.

The results suggest that residential desegregation can increase the educational attainment of individuals from disadvantaged social backgrounds without reducing the attainment of individuals from advantaged backgrounds. More class- and race-integrated metropolitan areas tend to have higher overall educational attainment because children from disadvantaged, segregated groups tend to do better, while members of advantaged, segregated groups do no worse.

The [full study](#) (gated) can be found in Lincoln Quillian's "Does Segregation Create Winners and Losers? Residential Segregation and Inequality in Educational Attainment," **Social Problems**, Vol. 61, No. 3 (August 2014), pp. 402-426. An ungated version is also available on [Prof. Quillian's webpage](#).

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