



# Separate and Unequal: Residential Segregation

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Segregation persists in urban and suburban neighborhoods, and it's not just a matter of what people can afford.

Residential segregation divides communities from one another and most often places black and Hispanic households in poorer neighborhoods with fewer public resources and a more difficult living environment.

National studies using recent census data show that black-white segregation remains high despite a continuing decline from its 1960s peak. Hispanics are less segregated than blacks in most areas, but there has been no reduction in Hispanic-white segregation in the last 30 years. Blacks and Hispanics also live in poorer neighborhoods than do whites, a disparity that holds even for those who reach the middle class. In most US metropolitan areas, the average black- or Hispanic-headed household with an income of over \$75,000 lives in a census tract with a higher poverty rate than the average white household that earns less than \$40,000.<sup>1</sup>

## Spatial Segregation in Boston

Consider Boston (the Boston-Cambridge-Quincy Metropolitan Statistical Area), where a substantial black population is now combined with a rapidly growing Hispanic minority.<sup>2</sup>

### Research Approach

To calculate segregation indices, I use population counts by race and ethnicity over time from the decennial census. Statistics involving income are based on the five-year pooled samples of the American Community Survey for 2005 to 2009. Census tracts (averaging about 4,000 residents) are treated as “neighborhoods,” and the data report what kind of neighborhood the average white, black, Hispanic, or Asian person lived in.<sup>3</sup>

### Limited Change

The Boston metro is quickly becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. In 1980 more than 90 percent of residents were white, dropping to under 75 percent in 2010. All minorities gained share, and their numbers are now well distributed among blacks (7.4 percent), Hispanics (9.0 percent), and Asians (7.1 percent). The pace of change is similar nationwide.

Individual neighborhoods, however, do not reflect that diversity. A look at the values of a standard measure of segregation of different groups from whites—the Dissimilarity Index—can be instructive. (See “Segregation Trends.”) In a range between values of 0 (when all tracts have the same racial/ethnic composition) and 1.0 (when tracts are either all-white or all-minority), social scientists generally consider values above .60 to be “very high.” At this level, 60 percent of blacks or whites would have to be relocated to other tracts where they are underrepresented in order to achieve an even distribution. Values between .45 and .60 are considered to be “high,” and between .35 and .45 to be “moderate.”

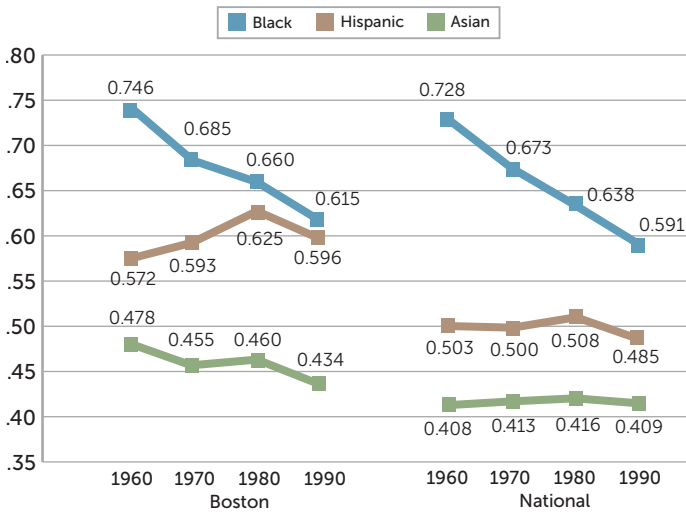
I compare the Boston metro to the average of all metropolitan regions in the country, presenting values for whites’ segregation



from blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. The values are similar for Boston and the nation for black-white segregation, but the segregation of Boston's Hispanic and Asian populations is greater than the national average. Moreover, black-white segregation is the highest, and remains around the .60 mark despite a considerable decline in the 1980s and smaller continuing declines since then. In fact, in Boston, blacks and Hispanics are now almost equally segregated from whites.

## Segregation Trends

Boston metro and national averages, 1980–2010



Source: Author's calculation. Census of 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2010.  
See also <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report2.pdf>.

There are two points to be made about residential segregation. First, many people assume that segregation reflects income differences and that minorities are residentially segregated because they cannot afford to live in a wider range of neighborhoods. Although the contrast between blacks and Hispanics on the one hand and Asians on the other is partly due to income differences—Asians have higher income and education than whites, on average—segregation is mostly based on race and ethnicity.

Second, discussions of segregation have focused on the extent to which Americans are exposed to diversity in their neighborhoods and how that affects intergroup relations. Less attention is given to the immediate consequence of segregation—inequalities in the quality of people's neighborhoods and the resources that neighborhoods provide for daily life.

Using American Community Survey tabulations that report the income distribution of people by race and ethnicity in all census tracts, it is possible to compare the neighborhoods where people live, taking income into account. (See "Race and Household Income.") A comparison of households with income below \$40,000 (well below the national median income) and those with incomes above \$75,000 (well above the median) is instructive. The average white person lives in a predominantly white neighborhood—80 percent or more white—regardless of income. The greatest contrast is with blacks. The disparity in racial composition between where poorer whites and poorer blacks live is about 34 percent. That can be thought of



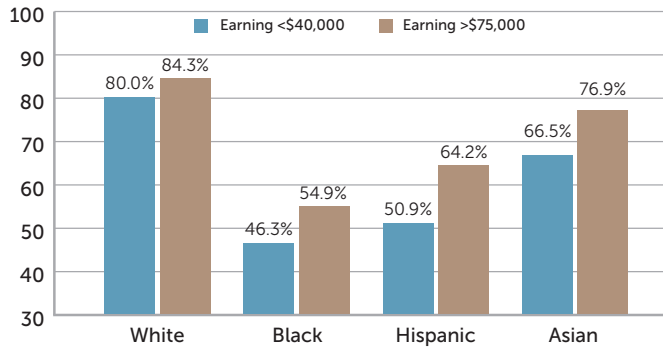
photo iStock/George Clerk



as a simple measure of the extent of segregation between the two groups, standardizing by income. The disparity is almost as great for poorer Hispanics, but considerably smaller for poorer Asians.

## Race and Household Income

Percent of white neighbors: Boston 2005–2009



Source: Author's calculation. American Community Survey, 2005–2009. See also <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report0727.pdf>.

Thus blacks, Hispanics, and Asians with higher incomes live in areas with more exposure to white neighbors. However, the difference between affluent and poor minorities having white neighbors is rather modest compared with the overall difference between minorities and whites.

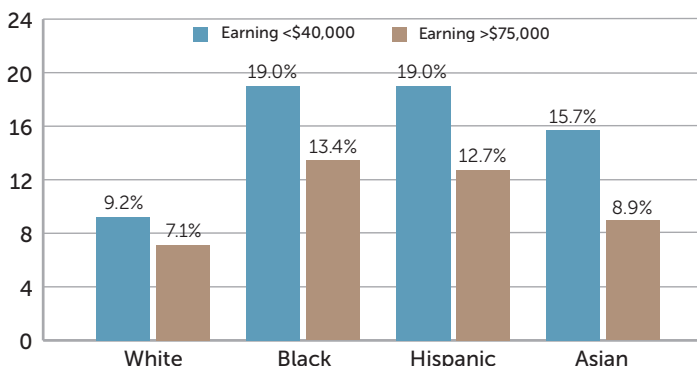
Consider next the share of neighboring households that fall below the poverty line. (See “Race and Poverty.”) Blacks and Hispanics, on average, live in neighborhoods where the poverty rate is about twice that of neighborhoods where whites with comparable incomes live. Further, in Boston, as in the country as a whole, affluent blacks and Hispanics live in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates (13.4 percent and 12.7 percent) than much poorer whites (9.2 percent).

## Understanding the Patterns

A longstanding question about black-white segregation has been how it can persist at such high levels despite other social changes that would suggest optimism: the growth of a black middle class

## Race and Poverty

Percent of neighbors below poverty: Boston 2005–2009



Source: Author's calculation. American Community Survey, 2005–2009. See also <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report0727.pdf>.

with many affordable choices of where to live, the passage of fair housing legislation at the national level and in some states and cities, and evidence from surveys that suggest increasing white openness to living in more diverse neighborhoods. Part of the answer is that systematic discrimination in the housing market persists and is seldom prosecuted. Fair housing laws are enforced mainly when minority home seekers can document discrimination and pursue a civil court case without assistance from officials.<sup>4</sup>

Another part of the answer is urban history. As African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s moved in large numbers from the South to northern industrial cities, it was clear where they were allowed to live, and the ghettos then created persist. The history for Hispanics and Asians is different because they are newer arrivals. Except in cities with a long history of Puerto Rican and Mexican settlement, Hispanics and Asians have experienced less discrimination and have been less segregated than blacks. There is also evidence that individual success (gaining more education, learning English, living longer in the United States) results in considerable mobility out of ethnic neighborhoods—much less true for African Americans. Yet because Hispanic numbers are growing rapidly, their geographic mobility cannot overcome the inflow into ethnic neighborhoods.

Another factor is the difference in the quality of collective resources in neighborhoods that have predominantly minority populations. It is especially true for African Americans and Hispanics that their neighborhoods are often served by the worst-performing schools, suffer the highest crime rates, and have the least valuable housing stock. Few whites with other options will return to these neighborhoods while they suffer from such problems. At this time, it appears that integration of neighborhoods rarely results from white in-migration but is mostly conditional upon the ability of minorities to move into previously all-white areas. That is happening more, especially in stable middle-class neighborhoods. But too often it results in white flight.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> See John R. Logan, “Separate and Unequal: The Neighborhood Gap for Blacks, Hispanics and Asians in Metropolitan America” (report, Brown University, Providence, 2011), <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Report/report0727.pdf>. Two figures in this article provide results for Boston comparable to those found at a national level in the report.
- <sup>2</sup> Providence and Hartford have patterns similar to Boston's. See <http://www.s4.brown.edu/us2010/Data/Data.htm>.
- <sup>3</sup> The Census Bureau treats race and Hispanic origin as two separate variables. Hispanics are persons of any race who identify themselves as having Hispanic origin. The other categories used here include only non-Hispanics. “White” refers to non-Hispanic persons who report only white race. “Black” refers to persons who reported their race as black alone or in combination with another race. “Asians” refer to persons who reported race as Asian along or in combination with another race, except black.
- <sup>4</sup> The Supreme Court has ruled that public policy decisions affecting placement of low-income housing can be challenged on the grounds of disparate impact. The ruling preserves a four-decade legal standard, but it does not offer any new tool to further fair housing.