

Segregation in American schools still problematic, despite best efforts

November 1 2013, by David Tenenbaum

As American schools struggle with issues of race, diversity and achievement, a new study in the *American Sociological Review* has split the difference in the ongoing discussion of resegregation. Yes, black, white and Hispanic students were less likely to share classrooms in 2010 than in 1993, but no, that increase in segregation is usually not the result of waning efforts to reduce it.

"People have a general idea that at the national level, there is widespread resegregation, based on the minority-[white](#) composition of the average [school](#), says author Jeremy Fiel, a sociology Ph.D. candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A significant part of the reduction in classroom diversity is simply a result of the increasing share of the Hispanic population and the declining share of whites, Fiel says. "Blacks and Hispanics have attended schools with a smaller proportion of whites over time, but the composition of schools depends on the composition of the area.

"If an area is 50-50 black and white, like some metropolitan areas and non-metropolitan counties, you can't do anything to make the average black student's school more than 50 percent white or less than 50 percent black," he says.

Segregation is back in the news because many school districts are moving away from mandatory desegregation plans, and often these districts do become more segregated in terms of the balance of whites

and minorities across schools, Fiel says.

But that finding, by itself, does not prove that intentional or reversible resegregation is taking place nationwide.

To study the causes of the increasing segregation of American schools, Fiel used data from the National Center for Education Statistics.

Focusing on 1993-2010, he compared the racial makeup of schools to that of their surrounding areas, and calculated how school composition would look if all schools were desegregated to match local populations. "The difference between the actual change in school composition and the change in the hypothetical desegregated world is due to changes in policies that promote or reduce segregation," Fiel says.

Viewing it this way—as a comparison of ideal to actual—brought Fiel to a surprising conclusion. Even though minorities are attending schools with fewer whites, "the exposure of blacks and Hispanics to whites was actually higher than would be expected," given a massive change in the composition of the student population. "That's the major finding."

Fiel used a similar process to find that private and charter schools play minor roles in segregation. The biggest contributor to the separation of whites and minorities, he found, occurs between different [school districts](#) in the same area, whose overall populations tend to be segregated along racial lines. "That's important," says Fiel, who taught school in Mississippi for three years, "as most desegregation policies that people talk about in this discussion of resegregation are at the district level: How are we going to replace busing, or use another technique to avoid segregation?"

Those questions are off the mark, he says, "because they are confined to a school district and don't address the biggest contributor to the separation of whites and minorities, which spans district lines."

District-level plans do have a role, Fiel agrees. "We might see segregation increase in a district if they reduce their efforts to achieve racial diversity, but given current realities, further efforts to implement district-level desegregation would have minimal impact on the problem that people want to address, the separation of whites and minority students. We need to think more creatively, to find different ways to address the problem of larger-scale segregation or improve schools in spite of the segregation that exists."

As the nation grows ever more diverse, [school segregation](#) causes difficulties in educational achievement, social and economic advancement, and social harmony, Fiel says. "I study segregation because I view it as a problem. But if we want to address it, we need to know what is actually happening."

Any study about such a hot-button issue is subject to misinterpretation, Fiel says. "My main worry is that people will interpret this study as saying that resegregation is not happening anywhere, or is not a problem, but that's not what the study shows. I find no widespread, national trend toward resegregation, at least in terms of processes that separate students, but the United States has large-scale changes in the composition of our population and we need to take them seriously to address the problems of [segregation](#)."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

Citation: Segregation in American schools still problematic, despite best efforts (2013, November 1) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-segregation-american-schools-problematic-efforts.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.