

# Families with kids increasingly live near families just like them

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Neighborhoods are becoming less diverse and more segregated by income—but only among families with children, a new study has found.

Study author Ann Owens, an assistant professor of sociology at USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, examined census data from 100 major U.S. metropolitan areas, from Los Angeles to Boston. She found that, among families with children, neighborhood income segregation is driven by increased income inequality in combination with a previously overlooked factor: school district options.

For families with high income, school districts are a top consideration when deciding where they will live, Owens said. And for those in large cities, they have multiple school districts where they could choose to buy homes.

Income segregation between neighborhoods rose 20 percent from 1990 to 2010, and income segregation between neighborhoods was nearly twice as high among households that have children compared to those without.

For childless families, schools are not a priority for selecting a home, which, Owens said, likely explains the reason that they did not see a rise in the income gap or in neighborhood segregation.

"Income inequality has an effect only half as large among childless folks," said Owens, whose study will be published online on April 27 and

in the June print edition of the *American Sociological Review*. "This implies that parents who have children see extra money as a chance to buy a home in a good neighborhood so that their kids may attend a good school."

She said the increased neighborhood income segregation that her study uncovered is a troubling sign for low-income families. Studies have shown that integrated learning environments are beneficial for children of disadvantaged households, and do no harm to children whose families have higher incomes.

"The growing [income gap](#) and increased economic segregation may lead to inequalities in children's test scores, educational attainment, and well-being," Owens said. "Neighborhood and school poverty are big drivers of low-income kids' poor educational outcomes, so rising income segregation perpetuates inequality and may reduce poor kids' mobility."

Since the No Child Left Behind Act went into effect in 2002, more data than ever have been made available on schools, the quality of their teachers, and their student achievement. It has given rise to a sense of competition and rankings. Owens said this increased focus on performance, plus having access to more information about schools, may have made school an even greater priority for parents.

Policymakers have been trying to address economic inequities through proposals such as wage increases, but based on the trend Owens found, they may have another option.

"If schools play an important role in [residential segregation](#), then breaking that link and making it less important and sort of alleviating parents' concerns about where their kids are going to attend school would reduce income segregation," Owens said.

She recommended that educational leaders should consider redrawing boundaries to reduce the number and fragmentation of [school districts](#) in major metropolitan areas. They also should consider designing inter-district choice plans and strengthening current plans within districts to address inequities.

Changing [school](#) attendance policies could be "more feasible than reducing [income inequality](#), raising the minimum wage, instituting metropolitan governance, or creating affordable housing stock to address residential segregation," Owens wrote.

Many researchers have argued that housing policy can drive education policy, but Owens wrote: "School policy can also be housing policy."

The study was funded by a grant (AE00101) from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Owens said she is working on a similar study of racial segregation trends among households with and without children.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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