

Mixed-income neighborhoods face steady decline

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The percentage of families living in very rich neighborhoods more than doubled, from 6.6 percent to 15.7 percent, between 1970 and 2012. At the same time, the percentage of families in middle-income neighborhoods fell significantly.

Credit: Wendy Kenigsberg/University Communications

America has been talking about racial segregation and its effects for decades. Now another kind of separation is grinding away at America's neighborhoods: income segregation, where people are separated by their wealth, or lack of it.

More than one-third of families in large metropolitan areas now live in neighborhoods of concentrated affluence or concentrated poverty, and middle-class neighborhoods have become less common, according to new research by a Cornell sociologist and her colleague. The effect on children could be critical, they say.

Kendra Bischoff, Cornell assistant professor of sociology, and Sean Reardon of Stanford University found that the percentage of families living in very rich neighborhoods more than doubled, from 6.6 percent to 15.7 percent, between 1970 and 2012. At the same time, the percentage of families in traditional middle-[income](#) neighborhoods fell from 65 percent to 41 percent.

"Local environments are important for children's early and adolescent development, so the more polarized communities become, the more unequal the opportunities available to high- and low-income children," Bischoff said.

Moreover, the rate of income segregation has accelerated in recent years,

Bischoff said. From 2007 to 2012 – the period that spanned the Great Recession and the early years of recovery – income segregation grew by 3.2 percentage points in just five years, compared to growth of approximately 4.5 percentage points in each decade since 1970.

"These are not new trends, but the increase in segregation in the last five years exacerbates the increase in economically polarized communities that has occurred over the last four decades," the authors wrote in their recent study, "The Continuing Increase in Income Segregation, 2007-2012."

These trends may be particularly damaging for children, Bischoff says. When the affluent live in isolation, it concentrates not only income and wealth in a small number of communities. It also concentrates social capital and political power, Bischoff said, such as the amount of time parents have to spend at the neighborhood school, the amount of green space or number of libraries in the neighborhood or the know-how and resources to organize political action.

"As a result, any self-interested investment the rich make in their own communities has little chance of 'spilling over' to benefit middle- and low-income families. In addition, it is increasingly unlikely that high-income families interact with middle- and low-income families, eroding some of the social empathy that might lead to support for broader public investment in social programs to help the poor and middle class," the authors write. "These processes pack a one-two punch that may do as much to harm the poor as does the concentration of poverty itself."

In ongoing research they've conducted since 2011, Bischoff and Reardon have found that a main driver of income segregation is [income inequality](#), which has grown substantially in the United States over the past four decades. In their latest research, Bischoff and Reardon found that

income segregation increased faster, on average, in metropolitan areas where income inequality was also rising quickly.

The researchers updated their earlier findings by analyzing the most recent data from the American Community Survey 2005-2014, as well as U.S. Census Bureau data from 1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000. For consistency with prior research, they restricted their analyses to the 117 large metropolitan areas that had populations greater than 500,000 in 2007.

The [metropolitan areas](#) with the largest increase in income segregation 2007-12 included Cape Coral/Fort Myers, Florida; Greenville, South Carolina; Provo/Orem, Utah; Charlotte/Gastonia/Concord, and Raleigh/Cary, North Carolina.

Income segregation may continue to increase if income inequality continues to rise. However, certain housing policies could help mitigate these effects, Bischoff said.

"In the long run, reducing income inequality is likely an effective way to restore middle-class neighborhoods. But in the short run, we can do other things to promote mixed-income communities, such as increasing the stock of affordable housing, monitoring inclusionary zoning policies and developing multifamily housing in certain neighborhoods," she said.

More information: The Continuing Increase in Income Segregation, 2007-2012: [cepa.stanford.edu/content/cont ... egregation-2007-2012](http://cepa.stanford.edu/content/cont...egregation-2007-2012)

Provided by Cornell University

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