

How social networks help perpetuate the cycle of segregation

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Credit: University of Washington

Think about the last time you looked for a new apartment or house.

Maybe you asked your friends or colleagues about where they lived. You

thought about your route to work, or that neighborhood you always drive through on your way to your kid's soccer practice.

Many of these places were familiar to you, whether from an occasional visit or part of a daily routine. And if you're like most [people](#), you ultimately moved to a neighborhood you knew about first- or secondhand.

That decision helped, however unintentionally, to cement patterns of residential [segregation](#), says Kyle Crowder, a University of Washington professor of sociology and co-author of [Cycle of Segregation](#), published in January by the Russell Sage Foundation. In the book, Crowder and his co-author, Maria Krysan of the University of Illinois at Chicago, focus on Chicago neighborhoods, the opinions of residents and the past and present policies that shape the city—put simply, a city known for its white neighborhoods on the north side, and [black neighborhoods](#) on the south and west.

Chicago, Crowder and Krysan point out, has some characteristics particularly endemic to large, industrial metropolises that grew in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But relatively newer cities like Seattle don't escape the economic, political and social forces that create and maintain segregation, Crowder said. Nor is addressing them an easy fix.

What makes this book different from other research on neighborhood segregation?

KC: For decades, we've been focused on fairly simplistic explanations for why cities remain so segregated: preferences, discrimination and economics. We're not saying those forces are unimportant. We're saying let's think about other social forces that are at play here.

Use the example of African-Americans and whites, because they're the most segregated from each other: One traditional theory is that African-Americans and whites live in separate residential spaces because they have different access to economic resources. Whites have higher levels of education, on average, more income, more wealth than do African-Americans, and so whites are better able to buy themselves into higher-quality neighborhoods. This is contradicted by the fact that African-Americans, even with high levels of income and wealth, tend to be segregated from high-income whites.

Another argument is preferences, that blacks choose to live in black neighborhoods, and whites choose to live in white neighborhoods. There's some evidence to say that especially among whites there is a pretty strong aversion to living around high concentrations of people of color, although that has softened over time. When we ask people about their willingness to live in diverse neighborhoods, there seems to be a growing appreciation of doing so, but it doesn't quite match the residential outcomes.

The third argument is that for African-Americans, even when they can afford to live in more integrated spaces and have preference to do so, they still don't end up in those kinds of places, because they're discriminated against. There are classic examples of this, of landlords who won't rent to "your kind" or who claim the apartment is rented, that kind of thing. But it's hard to measure discrimination, and the kinds of discrimination that pervade today are often quite subtle.

There are all kinds of forces that build residential segregation, but once it's entrenched in a city, it tends to take on a life of its own and perpetuate itself over generations and generations, thanks to an underappreciated set of social processes.

What are the social forces in people's lives, and how

do they influence where we live?

People's daily rounds are really shaped by residential segregation: where we go to work and shop, where we go to church, and where our kids go to school. White folks tend to do those things in one area of the city, and African-Americans tend to do those things in another area of the city, Latinos in a separate area, and so on. Those daily activities mean we all have exposure to different sets of neighborhoods, and when it comes time to search for housing, we tend to search for housing in places that we know.

The other big thing here is our social networks. We rely heavily on our social networks to gain knowledge of residential opportunities. If my social network is circumscribed, if my network is made up of mostly white folks, then I get information about places where white folks live. Residential segregation creates racially circumscribed lives that then translate to racially circumscribed search processes that then perpetuate [residential segregation](#).

Your book is set in Chicago. How is Seattle similar or different?

African-Americans moved to cities like Chicago during the Great Migration to take advantage of industrial jobs. During that time, there was also incredible racial strife and a variety of strategies – from protective covenants and redlining to financing the suburbanization of white populations – were enacted to segregate the growing black population from whites in these metropolitan areas. Even after you make practices like redlining and protective covenants illegal, white neighborhoods still have reputations for being racially unfriendly, and other areas have reputations for being the black areas of the city. People's daily lives and residential experiences are still ordered by what

happened decades ago.

In Seattle, segregation has declined since the 1970s. There's still a pronounced, moderate level of segregation, though there's more integration among nonwhite groups than in many cities. So what's unique about Seattle that's led to this higher-than-average level of integration? Two things: First, it's been a place that's grown rapidly, where newcomers settle into neighborhoods that in the past would have been defined as not for white folks. This brings up issues of gentrification and displacement and segregation, but it also leads at least temporarily to a higher level of integration. The other thing is that Seattle has less well-entrenched notions of what our neighborhoods are. In Chicago, if you named a neighborhood on the South Side, someone may never have been there, but they will tell you a million things about what that neighborhood is like based on what they think they know. Seattle has been such a growing, dynamic, changing place that I think the definitions and perceptions are a bit softer. We have a population that is more likely to explore residential spaces outside of the ones they've experienced.

You talk about the proactive ways the King County Housing Authority is approaching residential segregation.

The King County Housing Authority and other housing authorities tend to be great about moving voucher recipients into "high-opportunity" neighborhoods—places with jobs, higher-quality schools and accessible transit. King County's mobility specialists talk with voucher recipients about their residential needs and goals and encourage them to think more broadly about all the places that might fit those needs. If you say, "here's a voucher, good luck," people will rely heavily on their social networks and on places they already know, which is likely to help perpetuate segregation.

At the end of the Obama administration, there was a concerted effort to make sure that communities were taking steps to foster integration, and many had started to think about creating a variety of housing, and reaching out to populations that might not normally have contact with a particular area of the city. It's clear now that there's not going to be a whole lot of help from the federal government on this, so states and municipalities are going to have to take the lead. There are strong networks of governors and mayors who are starting to come together and learn from each other in the area of climate change; hopefully it will start to happen in terms of housing affordability and integration.

It's easy to think about neighborhoods in the abstract. Neighborhoods differ in terms of racial composition, quality of housing, schools and the level of crime, and we need to address some of those structural, political and economic forces that have led to disinvestment in African-American and Latino neighborhoods in most metropolitan areas.

We need to invest in those neighborhoods so they are good [neighborhoods](#) for everybody—good for the people who live there, and good for the people who might think about living there.

Provided by University of Washington

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