

Income, segregated schools drive Black-white education gaps, study finds

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Given the same levels of family, school and neighborhood hardship, Black students would be more likely than their white classmates to complete high school and attend college—reversing current disparities,

according to new research from the University of Michigan and Cornell University.

Accounting for the unequal contexts in which Black and [white children](#) grow up and go to school also narrows test-score gaps substantially—by more than 60%, according to the study, which followed nearly 130,000 Michigan students from kindergarten through college enrollment.

"Our analysis reveals a stark divide in the social origins of Black and white children coming of age in the beginning of the 21st century—and the toll this divide takes on educational inequality," the authors wrote.

Katherine Michelmore, associate professor of [public policy](#) at the U-M's Ford School of Public Policy, co-authored the study with Peter Rich, assistant professor of sociology and demographer at Cornell's Brooks School of Public Policy. It is published this month in *Social Forces*.

Sociologists and policymakers long have sought to assess the extent to which family background, school quality and neighborhood environment each contribute to educational disparities.

The study by Michelmore and Rich updates that understanding for the No Child Left Behind era, by tracking students educated entirely after passage of the 2001 legislation focused on school accountability and choice. Michigan offered an ideal case study, they said, since its students mirror the nation demographically and could be observed over 16 years, from 2002 to 2018.

The authors obtained restricted access to student records through a partnership with the Michigan Education Research Initiative and the Michigan Department of Education.

Students' eligibility for subsidized lunches provided a measure of family

[economic hardship](#). Roughly half of all white students were disadvantaged at some point in time, compared with more than 90% of Black students. The researchers also created indexes of school and neighborhood disadvantage, including factors such as a school's percentage of low-income students and average scores on eighth and 11th grade math tests, or a neighborhood's poverty and unemployment rates.

Controlling for disadvantage across each context over time, the scholars determined that, consistent with prior research, family resources explain by far the biggest share of Black-white education gaps.

"This finding implies that material differences in the contexts inherited by Black and white children—rather than individual effort—drive the large education gaps we observe," they wrote. "These trends have persisted through the recent era of federal accountability reforms."

After [family background](#), Michelmore and Rich found schools—specifically, those highly segregated due to systemic inequality in wealth and housing—are "consequential," disproportionately exposing Black students to disadvantage for longer durations.

"Results from our study support concerns that schools exacerbate Black-white inequality," they write, countering recent debates suggesting that neighborhood context primarily drives differences in student outcomes.

When they controlled for all three contexts together, the researchers found that gaps of nearly 13% in [high school](#) graduation and 17% in college enrollment were not only eliminated but reversed, and disparities in test scores narrowed dramatically.

Strengthening those insights, they said, was a longitudinal methodology that more accurately captured the effects of economic hardship over students' careers until college. Researchers commonly rely on data

reported for a single year, they said, which can obscure distinctions between students who are eligible for subsidized lunches consistently, sporadically or never.

"If you only look at a snapshot in time, you're missing the true portrait of a student's family economic hardship," said Rich, a faculty affiliate in Cornell's Center for the Study of Inequality. "That's especially important for questions around [racial inequality](#), because Black children are far more likely to live in economic hardship for longer periods of time."

Micheltore notes that children who grow up in poverty are less likely to go to college regardless of race but Black children are four times more likely to experience chronic economic hardship than white children. That, she says, explains why we find this reversal of the enrollment gap once differing rates of hardship are taken into account.

"As education researchers, we're often limited in what information we have available to us, but part of what we intended to show here is that you can be a little creative with the data that you do have—taking into account kids' economic hardship over time, for instance, and it can make a big difference in the findings," she said.

The authors say their analysis suggests a need for complex policy solutions addressing systemic inequities. Despite decades of ostensibly race-neutral policies, they concluded, Black-white educational disparities persist because of a long history of racial exclusion that has limited Black Americans' access to homeownership, high-achieving schools, college degrees and high-paying jobs.

"We underscore the relevance of this study to renewed attention to systemic racism as an urgent crisis," they write. "Our findings amplify the argument that uprooting systemic racism requires an ongoing confrontation with how this history warps Black and white childhood

opportunities."

More information: Katherine Micheltore et al, Contextual Origins of Black-White Educational Disparities in the 21st Century: Evaluating Long-Term Disadvantage Across Three Domains, *Social Forces* (2022). [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soac098](https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soac098)

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