

Race still divides South Africa: Study shows little transformation in new suburbs in country's economic hub

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As South Africa reflects on 30 years of democracy, it's important to ask whether its cities have changed for the better when it comes to racial

mixing.

During [apartheid](#), South Africa's residential development was segregated in law along racial lines. Black African residents were consigned to townships on the outskirts of cities while white residents lived in suburbs close to facilities and employment. This established negative spatial, economic and social [outcomes](#) among race groups.

Democracy in 1994 brought an opportunity for new residential developments to be more racially mixed. But are they?

In a recent [study](#) I explore whether South Africa is achieving spatial transformation now that different race groups can legally mix in neighborhoods.

The short answer is no. While a few new residential developments in the country's Gauteng province improve racial mixing, many other developments do not. Expansion projects near townships (the residential areas set aside for black people) are still home to residents who are black African and poor. Suburban expansion for wealthy residents is racially mixed, but [economic inequality](#) is still rife between race groups.

This segregation causes some groups to remain separated from job opportunities and urban amenities. These residents face many costs (like transport) in order to find and keep jobs or to access amenities in parts of the city that are far away from their homes.

The result is a continuous cycle of segregation and inequality. In order to break this cycle, South Africa's cities need radical spatial transformation.

The study

Overall, levels of racial mixing have [increased](#) since the advent of

democracy. In Gauteng, the country's economic hub, desegregation has taken place in many former white-only suburbs. This represents some progress towards a racially equal post-apartheid society. But what about new residential areas?

My investigation required two things: spatial data for [residential development](#) over the decades and recent population estimates for different racial categories. Then I used an [index of segregation](#) to calculate the racial diversity of all residential areas built in Gauteng since 1990.

In this period, the residential footprint of Gauteng grew by about 905km², creating many opportunities for racial mixing and spatial transformation. But [my research](#) shows that new residential developments tend to reproduce the racial diversity of the areas from which they expanded. And the [majority of residential expansion](#) happens in peripheral land around townships. This actually lowers the overall racial diversity of the province.

Racial diversity studies provide valuable insights into the broad changes to the apartheid geography since democracy.

The findings

I found that the racial diversity of new residential developments in Gauteng is even lower now than it was in 1990. So new residential expansion in Gauteng, on average, does not lead to more racial mixing. Of those who live in residential areas that developed after 1990, 80% live in areas that have very little—less than 10%—of racial mixing.

There is, however, considerable variation across the province (see map above). Desegregation (racial mixing) takes place in quite a few areas. But new residential areas with low and high racial diversity are still far

away from each other on the map. For example, the richer northern parts of Johannesburg have high racial diversity (people of all races live in new residential developments there). The poorer southern parts have low racial diversity.

In the map, new residential areas are shaded based on their racial diversity. Light yellow areas have low racial diversity and dark purple ones have higher racial diversity. It's easy to see that racial diversity is low in areas that were added next to townships such as Mamelodi in Pretoria and Soweto in Johannesburg.

But it's high in areas added next to former white-only suburbs like Menlyn and Randburg. The higher racial diversity here is directly related to increases in townhouses, cluster complexes and semi-detached housing developments. Middle- to upper-income households live here. Even so, some of these developments led to more racial mixing while others didn't.

Are classes mixing more?

Another aim of the research was to try to understand if more racial mixing also leads to more class mixing. Does it positively influence socio-economic sorting? [Research](#) has highlighted increasing inequality and socio-economic sorting in many cities around the world. Cities that are increasingly shaped by socio-economic sorting, for example, include Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Istanbul.

My research found that in racially mixed areas, the average household income of white residents is significantly higher than that of black African residents (see graph above).

Income inequality in neighborhoods therefore remains high despite desegregation. Case studies in the research also illustrate how the

affordability of housing and the social character of neighborhoods influence class mixing. For example, in many instances affordable housing leads to more mixed residential areas while this is not happening in the upper end of the market with more expensive houses.

So, while it's not possible to assume that affluent areas include just one race group as they did in the past, one can also not assume there's socio-economic equality in new racially mixed areas.

Despite 30 years of gradual racial mixing in former whites-only neighborhoods, spatial transformation is slow. And the association between space and class in Gauteng has not changed significantly. Residential expansion generally reproduces the racial and socio-economic composition of the areas from which they expanded.

What this all means

The research highlights that opportunities for racial and socio-economic integration can only be created on a very local level if a diversity of housing options is provided in neighborhoods. In other words, new developments must cater to a bigger range of income groups—there should be upmarket townhouses alongside more affordable flats and social housing developments, for example like what is happening in suburbs like Cosmo City or Fleurhof.

Public housing programs and post-apartheid housing policies provide some hope that this can still happen. Public housing initiatives must provide affordable [housing](#) in close proximity to areas with economic opportunities. Public policy must ensure that a person's residential location is not the biggest (and most impossible) burden that they have to overcome for a better life.

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