

Structure to Community to Individual: A review on the progress (or lack thereof)
in racial equality in the United States following the 1960s

Fifty-six years ago, on the Second of July, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. This landmark piece of legislature, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that proceeded it, struck down some of the last legal precedents of racism and racial inequality in the United States. Fifty-six years later in light of recent movements, failures to fix previous mistakes, and even fundamental pieces of the Constitution, many Americans today are left asking how far we have progressed since those key legislations. While the public conscience has long since moved past the crippling zeitgeist of widespread racism against African-Americans, the deepest issues of a history of racism in the US such as housing segregation and wealth inequality created by racially biased policies, school segregation, and police accountability still remain largely untouched or have slipped back into racial bias.

Before the root cause and it's consequences can be understood, some history is required.

During the Great Depression, the US Federal Government created the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) in order to slow the spiking rate of home foreclosures. In 1935, the HOLC worked



Image courtesy of KCTS9. Pictured above is the depression era HOLC risk assessment map made for Seattle, Washington. James Gregory states “any neighborhood that allowed residency by non-whites was automatically considered part of the red-zone.

with local realtors to establish geographic risk assessment maps for real estate in 239 major cities. In these maps, it has been shown that any geographic location containing a significant concentration of non-whites was always marked as “hazardous”, often for that reason exclusively (Hillier 394). These areas were colored red on the maps, hence the name the phenomenon has been given, redlining. Redlining is defined by Amy Hillier as “lending (or insurance) discrimination that bases credit decisions on the location of a property to the exclusion of characteristics of the borrower or property,” in her 2003 report on the subject published in the *Journal of Urban History* (395). She also writes, “Usually, it means that lenders will not make loans to areas with African Americans or other perceived risks to real estate investments,” (395). The immediate and direct impact of an inability to acquire home loans and maintain credit is devastating both for the individual families and the communities at large. As Chairman Randy Noel of the National Association of Home Builders explains, “Homeownership is a primary source of net worth for many Americans, and is an important step in accumulating personal financial assets over the long term.” Because of redlining, African-Americans were robbed of the ability to generate family wealth over the long term until incredibly recently, even as recent as one generation ago, causing a myriad of demographic inequalities that still persist into the modern-day, like health, schooling, and crime. For example, one recent study by Aaronson, Hartley, and Mazumder finds, “gaps in racial segregation along both the C-B and D-C borders remains in 2010, almost three-quarters of a century later,” (32). These facts of persistent housing segregation dig up memories of a young Congressman John Lewis, who because of the deep segregation in the South during his childhood, was awestruck when he saw that in the North his aunt and uncle “had white people living next door to them. On **both** sides,” (Aydin and Lewis 43)

A derivative consequence of this general lack of opportunity due to redlining is explored in Elizabeth Eisenhauer's "In Poor Health: Supermarket redlining and urban nutrition" where she finds, "Urban disinvestment works with other factors (employment, education, transportation policies, etc.) to diminish the health and quality of life of the (disproportionately non-white) urban poor," (131). Structurally established poor health is an absolutely devastating effect on people in poverty, especially in the United States, who despite being the wealthiest country on Earth (Silver), lacks major universal or free healthcare programs. The combination of these factors contributes to the statistic that 17.2% of black citizens report neglecting to address important health and medical issues due to a prohibitive cost (Weinick et. al. 506). Along with these more immediate impacts of redlining come more indirect, but still equally important consequences as well.

As outlined earlier, one of the most visible extensions of this is segregation in public education. Despite the desegregation efforts of the late 20th century, 53% of students in America go to a school that is either 75% white or 75% non-white (Edbuild 3). It was argued decades ago that separate will leave the chance for inequality, and as the statistics show, *separate still means unequal*. The inequality of schools between white and non-white districts is clearly demonstrated by the fact that primarily non-white school districts afford \$2,226 dollars less per student enrolled when compared to their primarily white counterparts (Edbuild 6). There are 4 times as many students that go to poor and non-white districts than poor and white ones (Edbuild 3). These statistics about wealth inequality between school districts are very reminiscent of the poor, hand-me-down nature of segregated black schools in the early 20th century as described by John Lewis in the first book of his autobiographical graphic novel *March* (Aydin and Lewis 48).

Some may discredit that evidence and instead raise that it is more indicative of wealth inequality. While that is completely true, an increase in the quality of schools is closely linked to the wealth of its surrounding area, according to a report by the National Bureau of Economic Research which claims “A \$1.00 increase in per-pupil state aid increases aggregate per pupil housing values by about \$20.00” (Gorman). Naysayers could also argue that distributed funding

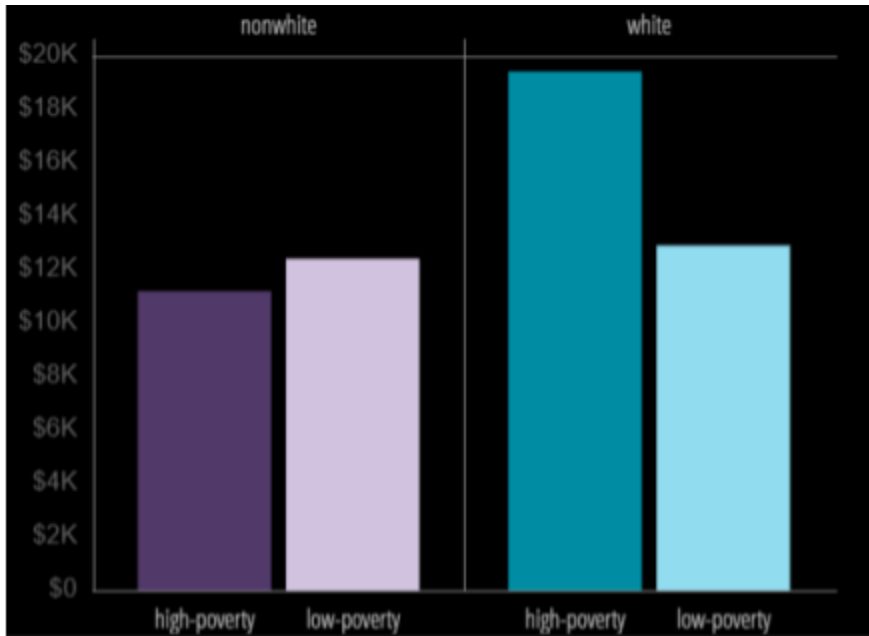


Image courtesy of Edbuild. Pictured above is school spending per-pupil broken down by race and poverty level in Washington State. Notice poverty is only considered an issue in Washington schools as far as funding is concerned when it is a predominantly white school district.

per pupil isn't important to the overall quality of a district's education. This viewpoint usually draws evidence from a grouping of different studies published around the 1960s. However, this evidence has been mostly invalidated by a large-scale meta-analysis of the most commonly cited of these studies published in 1996 by Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine in the Review

of Educational Research. So not only has the foundational evidence for the idea that school funding is mostly unrelated to the quality of education been dismissed by the larger scientific community, but there also exists immense evidence to the contrary as well. The brief for a study titled “How Money Matters In Schools” by Bruce D. Baker, states:

Yes. Schooling resources that cost money are positively associated with student outcomes. These include smaller class sizes, additional instructional supports, early

childhood programs, and more competitive teacher compensation, which permits schools and districts to recruit and retain a higher quality teacher workforce. These resources typically matter more for students from low-income families and students who have been lower achieving. There is scarce evidence that one can gain stronger outcomes without these resources.

The effects in students of this disparity in funding show themselves readily in ProPublica's interactive report *Miseducation*. Using a visual comparison on their interactive map, one will notice an extremely strong demographic correlation between segregation in schools and inequality of academic achievement between its white and non-white pupils, as well as enrollment in honors and advance placement classes. Furthermore, ProPublica reports that black students are 3.9x more likely to be suspended than white students, all adding up to the reality that underfunded black schools are failing students in the exact same they have been since school segregation was ruled unconstitutional in *Brown vs. Board of Education* 66 years ago, leading to disadvantaged and impoverished communities everywhere in the US.

The impoverishment caused and perpetuated by a history of redlining and its echoes in contemporary society became one of the root problems of the larger social issue of racially biased police violence, which rose to a fever pitch this Summer of 2020. A study led by Michael Seigel at the Boston University School of Public Health provides insight into the issue at hand and its underlying causes. Seigel and his team tabulated segregation and inequality of blacks from whites in housing, academic achievement, wealth, employment, and incarceration rates into a 100-point scale called the State Racism Index. This measurement is used to show how severe the lasting effects of a history of racial bias are within a state. Their study reports that every 10-point increase on the scale was correlated to a 67% increase in the ratio of police shootings on

unarmed black citizens to unarmed white citizens. This study is monumentally important because it directly discredits the argument that higher levels of violent crime perpetrated by blacks than whites are directly to blame for the increased perpetration of police violence against the black population. Measuring unarmed victims serves to show that there is something fundamental about being black in the United States, presumably an inheritance of the conditions of a history of racism, that leads to higher levels of police violence, rather than individual behavior. It also explores how the reality of racially biased police violence is a consequence of foundational issues with the structure of contemporary American society caused by unfinished addressing of our collective history of racism and prejudice.

As correlated earlier, poverty and historical (and sometimes continuing) racial bias are closely related, creating an environment where black citizens are exceedingly more likely to live in poverty (US Census Bureau), which is important in terms of crime and police intervention because, as Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius once said, “poverty is the mother of crime,” (Ramsey 30). The last of the Five Good Emperors’ philosophical conjecture is corroborated by the report published by the Bureau of Justice Statistics that attests, “Persons in poor households at or below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) (39.8 per 1,000) had more than double the rate of violent victimization as persons in high-income households (16.9 per 1,000),” (Harrell and Langton 1). Furthermore, it can be confirmed through the same report that the amount of violent crime perpetrated by impoverished, urban blacks per thousand is actually marginally less than the amount for impoverished, urban whites (Harrell and Langton 1), thereby proving that it is the environment of urban poverty that perpetuates higher crime rates, and not something inherent about the people themselves. This evidence fundamentally contradicts the quite honestly racist viewpoint that something about the genetics or culture of black communities propagates

violence, and instead supports the idea that higher rates of violent crime in the black populace are instead caused by a structural inequality of impoverishment and civil neglect.

It's clear that simply moving past a long history of fundamental racism in America is not enough to fix the wide-reaching consequences it has. From self-sustaining cycles of poverty in education, to housing segregation and all of its injustices, to the sad truth of a disproportionate conflict of black citizens and law enforcement, many issues still exist as a direct consequence of the United State's deep history of racism that should've ended with the Voting Rights Act of 1965. President Lyndon B. Johnson also gave a speech while pleading to congress to pass that act ,and in that speech he set a goal post for Americans when he asserted "and should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth, and should we conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people, and as a nation," (Lewis and Aydin 223). Let us hold hope for the future that soon we will be able to look at ourselves and not come to the unfortunate conclusion that we have failed the marginalized, and that we have failed ourselves.

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