

A West Side Story of Upward Mobility:  
Segregation in Lincoln Square

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I grew up in the Upper West Side of Manhattan, New York, more specifically in Lincoln Square. My family lived in a 34-story white brick building, the Dorchester Towers, on 68th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue.<sup>1</sup> The building was built in 1964, probably as part of the Lincoln Square Urban Renewal Project (1955 – 1969). The project included the construction of 4,400 new housing units, 4,000 of which were middle-income or luxury apartments. With the opening of Lincoln Center, a 16.3-acre complex of buildings dedicated to the performing arts, in the 1960s, Lincoln Square became a cultural district, an appealing place to live for middle- and high-income families.<sup>2</sup> The project displaced more than 7,000 low-income families, almost exclusively black and Hispanic.<sup>3</sup> However, the Amsterdam Houses, public housing built in 1948 in Lincoln Square (also called San Juan Hill at the time), remained, surrounded by gentrified neighborhoods.

Overall, Lincoln Square seems to be an opportunity-rich neighborhood. The Opportunity Atlas, a database of American children's outcomes in adulthood (born 1978 – 1983), compiled by linking anonymized data from the 2000 and 2010 censuses to federal income tax returns from 1989 to 2015, shows that in Lincoln Square, children raised in low-income households<sup>4</sup> have an average household income of \$38,172 at age 35, which is significantly higher than the Manhattan-wide average of \$33,025.<sup>5</sup> However, closer examination of the seven census tracts in Lincoln Square reveals a divide within the area: while four tracts range from \$40,603 to \$45,463,

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<sup>1</sup> Carter Horsley, "Dorchester Towers At 155 West 68th Street: Review And Ratings,"

<https://www.cityrealty.com/nyc/lincoln-center/dorchester-towers-155-west-68th-street/review/3354>.

<sup>2</sup> Julia L. Foulkes, "Streets and Stages: Urban Renewal and the Arts After World War II," *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 2 (2010): 413 – 434, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2010.0083>.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Williams, "How Lincoln Center Was Built (It Wasn't Pretty)," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/21/nyregion/how-lincoln-center-was-built-it-wasnt-pretty.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The Opportunity Atlas defines children raised in low-income households as children whose parents were at the 25th percentile of the national income distribution.

<sup>5</sup> Raj Chetty, John Friedman, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, "The Opportunity Atlas: Mapping the Childhood Roots of Social Mobility" (2018): 1 [https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/atlas\\_paper.pdf](https://opportunityinsights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/atlas_paper.pdf).

three tracts range from \$30,448 to \$32,767. There appears to be an uneven playing field for upward mobility in Lincoln Square.

In order to understand this divide, I focused on two of the seven tracts, Tract 36061015300 (labeled Tract A), which has the highest average household income at age 35 for children raised in low-income households, and Tract 36061015100 (labeled Tract B), which has the lowest.

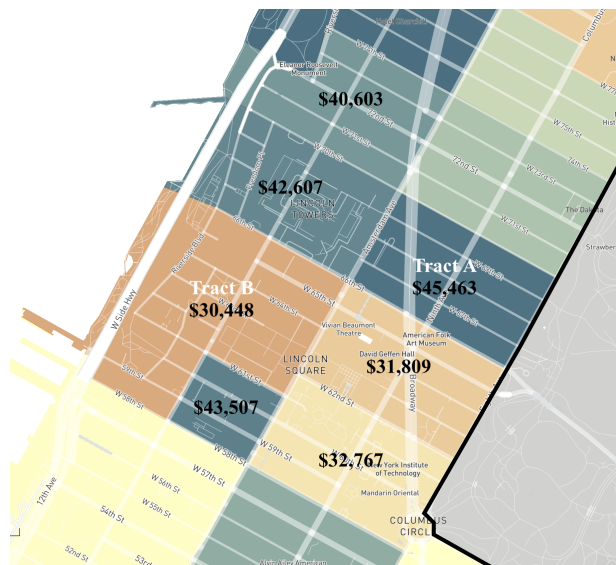


Figure 1: Lincoln Square

Area	Household Income at Age 35 for Children Raised in Low-Income Households
Tract A	\$45,463
Tract B	\$30,448
Lincoln Square	\$38,172
Manhattan	\$33,025

Figure 2: Neighborhood and County Upward Mobility

Area	Median Household Income	Median Rent for Renter-Occupied Housing Units
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Tract A	\$150,422	\$2,605
Tract B	\$52,165	\$1,095
Manhattan	\$81,518	\$1,697

Figure 3: Neighborhood and County Median Household Income and Rent in 2012 – 2016

Although Tract A and Tract B are adjacent to each other, there are stark differences in the characteristics of these two neighborhoods. Tract A happens to be where I was raised. The neighborhood consists of several market-rate apartment buildings for families with a median household income of \$150,422. The median rent in Tract A is \$2,605, about \$1,000 above the Manhattan-wide median of \$1,697. Residents are predominantly white (84.8%), and very few fall below the federal poverty line (5.4%). In contrast, Tract B is where the Amsterdam Houses, a 9.49-acre apartment complex of ten 6-story buildings and three 13-story buildings, are located. The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) provides this low-rent public housing to low- or moderate-income households that otherwise could not afford to live in Lincoln Square. The majority of Tract B is non-white (62.5%), and about one-fifth of residents are below the poverty line (18.5%).

Area	Racial Demographics				Poverty Rate	Share of Single-Headed Households with Children
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian		
Tract A	84.8%	2.2%	5.0%	6.1%	5.4%	14.2%
Tract B	35.6%	24.2%	29.2%	9.1%	18.5%	53.7%

Figure 4: Neighborhood Composition in 2000

In short, despite their geographical proximity, Tract A and Tract B are segregated in terms of poverty rate and race.

I believe that this segregation is driving the divide in upward mobility between Tract A and Tract B. Linear regressions of upward mobility<sup>6</sup> on poverty rate and upward mobility on the share of non-white residents in tracts across Manhattan reveal that there are significant negative correlations between poverty rate and upward mobility as well as the share of non-white residents and upward mobility (the regressions yield p-values less than 0.05 and correlation coefficients of -0.403341 and -0.4287502, respectively). This means that as the poverty rate and share of non-white residents in a neighborhood increases, upward mobility in that neighborhood decreases, which is exactly what we observe from Tract A and Tract B.

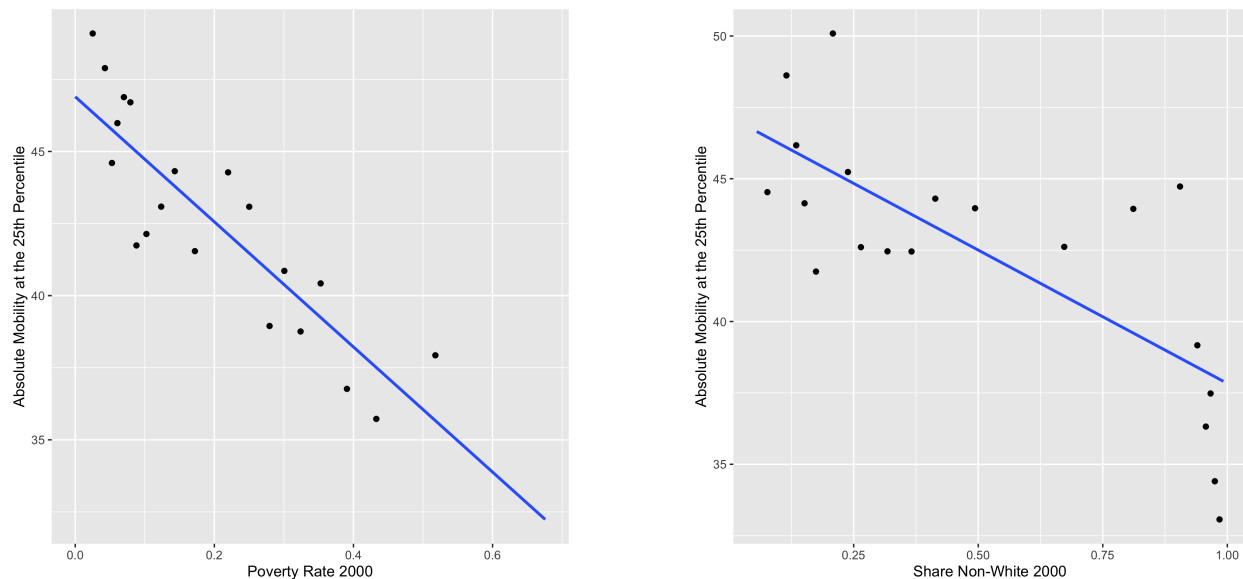


Figure 5: Relationships of Poverty Rate and Race in 2000 with Upward Mobility in Manhattan

In addition, more than half of households with children in Tract B are headed by a single parent (53.7%), while only 14.2% in Tract A are. There also seems to be a significant negative correlation between the share of single-parent households in a neighborhood and upward

<sup>6</sup> Here, I measure upward mobility with the statistic Absolute Mobility at the 25th Percentile, the predicted income rank of a child whose parents were at the 25th percentile of the income distribution, as defined by Chetty et al. This statistic is estimated using a linear regression of child income ranks on parent income ranks.

mobility (the regression yields a p-value less than 0.05 and a correlation coefficient of -0.5724889).

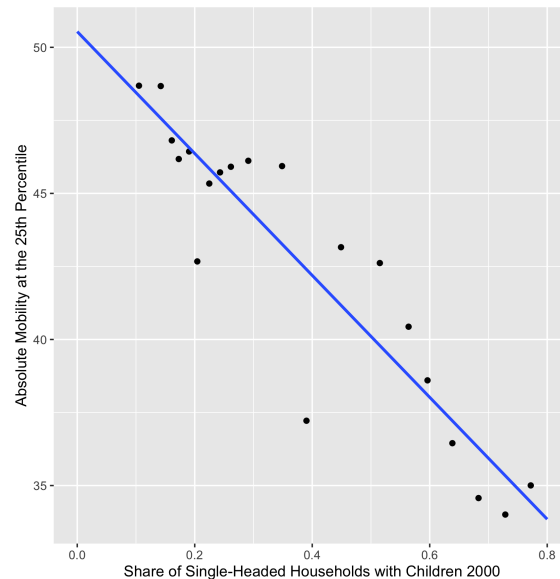


Figure 6: Relationship of Share of Single-Headed Households with Children in 2000 with Upward Mobility in Manhattan

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the divide in upward mobility in Lincoln Square, I also examined school quality in Tract A and Tract B. Lincoln Square belongs to Manhattan School District 3. Prior to rezoning in 2017, Tract A was zoned for P.S. 199 on 70th Street, while Tract B was zoned for P.S. 191 on 61th Street.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the racial and economic disparities between Tract A and Tract B are replicated in P.S. 199 and P.S. 191. Students at P.S. 191 are largely poor (26.6% are below the poverty line), black (37.8%), and Hispanic (49.0%). On the other hand, very few students at P.S. 199 are below the poverty line (5.0%), and the majority are white (62.2%).<sup>8</sup> P.S. 199 was designed by famed architect Edward Durell Stone in

<sup>7</sup> While P.S. 199 serves Kindergarten through Grade 5, P.S. 191 serves Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8. Thus, when grades are not indicated, the statistics for P.S. 199 are calculated based on Kindergarten through Grade 5, while those for P.S. 191 are based on Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8.

<sup>8</sup> NYC Department of Education, “2016-17 School Quality Guide - Online Edition,” <https://tools.nycenet.edu/SchoolQualityGuide-OnlineEdition-NewYorkCityDepartmentofEducation/guide/2017/>.

1963, and the Parent-Teacher Association raises about \$800,000 a year to provide teaching assistants, enrichment programs, and learning resources, making P.S. 199 one of the most sought-after public elementary schools in Manhattan.<sup>9</sup> In fact, my family moved to the Dorchester Towers, even though the rent was a bit of a stretch, so that I could begin my formal education at P.S. 199.

School	Student Racial Demographics				Student Poverty Rate
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	
P.S. 199	62.2%	4.1%	11.3%	14.9%	5.0%
P.S. 191	5.9%	37.8%	49.0%	5.6%	26.6%

Figure 7: Student Composition in the 2016 – 2017 School Year

According to the 2016-17 School Quality Guide by the New York City Department of Education, there are alarming differences in student achievement between P.S. 199 and P.S. 191. While most students at P.S. 199 met state standards on state tests in English, Math, and Science, most students at P.S. 191 did not. Furthermore, less than two-thirds of students at P.S. 191 attended school consistently.<sup>10</sup>

School	Percentage of Students Who Met State Standards on State Tests							Percentage of Students with 90%+ Attendance
	English			Math			Science	
	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 4	
P.S. 199	77.2%	84.2%	74.4%	80.1%	89.2%	81.9%	98.6%	93.2%
P.S. 191	37.8%	9.5%	14.8%	35.3%	13.0%	7.1%	52.2%	64.1%

<sup>9</sup> Kate Taylor, “Upper West Side School Zones Changed, but Not All Parents Went Along,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2017,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/nyregion/ps-191-ps-199-ps-452-rezoning-schools-manhattan.html>.

<sup>10</sup> NYC Department of Education, “2016-17 School Quality Guide - Online Edition.”

Figure 8: Student Achievement and Attendance in the 2016 – 2017 School Year

Putting everything together, it becomes clearer why children from low-income households in Tract A grow up to be much more successful than their counterparts in Tract B. Although Tract B is well-located, just west of Lincoln Center, in the cultural district of Lincoln Square, it is segregated in terms of race and income. The predominantly poor, black, and Hispanic children in Tract B cannot access resources available to the affluent, white neighborhoods of Lincoln Square, while their counterparts in Tract A can. While low-income children in Tract A enjoyed the high-quality education of P.S. 199, low-income children in Tract B were segregated to P.S. 191, which has concerning low student achievement. The prevalence of single-parent households in Tract B compared to Tract A may also explain the lower rate of upward mobility in Tract B.

It is crucial that low-income households, especially those with a single parent, be provided with housing assistance in opportunity-rich neighborhoods so that their children have better outcomes in adulthood. While the Amsterdam Houses provide affordable public housing to low-income, minority children in Lincoln Square, these children are still contained within their impoverished neighborhood without access to much of the resources that the rest of Lincoln Square offers. The Amsterdam Houses were part of a slum-clearance project in the historically black Upper West Side neighborhood of San Juan Hill and were created for residents to have a decent standard of living after World War II. However, some have argued that “the plan was less about slum clearance than maintaining slum boundaries.”<sup>11</sup> Simply providing public housing cannot be the ideal way to bolster low-income children’s upward mobility. To bolster upward mobility, housing assistance in opportunity-rich neighborhoods should be provided so that

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<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner, “Public Neighborhoods,” in *Affordable Housing in New York: The People, Places, and Policies That Transformed a City* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 104.



low-income children can benefit from the resources that the area offers, as much as their higher-income peers.

Further research is needed to better understand and promote upward mobility for low-income children living in public housing, surrounded by gentrified neighborhoods. First, while I established correlations between poverty rate, race, and the share of single-parent households and upward mobility, I have not proven that these relationships are causal. Furthermore, I focused only on the Amsterdam Houses in Lincoln Square, but in Manhattan alone, NYCHA owns and manages 84 public housing developments with 51,471 apartments and 106,977 residents.<sup>12</sup> It would be helpful to study whether children in some public housing developments fare better than others, and if so, why. The study of low-income children's upward mobility in this paper also does not examine recent changes in the landscape of Lincoln Square. At the site of a 77-acre former rail yard, once occupied by auto body shops, desolate parking lots, and storage facilities, between 59th and 72nd Streets along the Hudson River, the Riverside Center, consisting of five apartment towers, is under development.<sup>13</sup> The first tower of the Riverside Center was completed in 2017. P.S. 191 relocated to the base of this 43-story tower, a block away from its old site.<sup>14</sup> In addition, twenty percent of the apartments in this tower are affordable housing.<sup>15</sup> In an effort to reduce overcrowding as well as to mitigate racial and economic segregation, the NYC Department of Education redrew elementary school zones in Lincoln Square. The Amsterdam Houses are now divided among three school zones, P.S. 191,

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<sup>12</sup> New York City Housing Authority, "NYCHA 2021 Fact Sheet,"

[https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet\\_2021.pdf](https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/nycha/downloads/pdf/NYCHA-Fact-Sheet_2021.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> C. J. Hughes, "Sewing Up a Loose End on West End," *The New York Times*, November 14, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/16/realestate/residential-towers-finish-project-on-far-west-side.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Brendan Krisel, "PS 191 Moves Into New School Building On Upper West Side," Patch, Aug 30, 2017, <https://patch.com/new-york/upper-west-side-nyc/photos-ps-191-moves-new-school-building-upper-west-side>.

<sup>15</sup> Rachel Sugar, "Affordable apartments in a luxe Upper West Side tower will rent from \$833/month," *New York Curbed*, August 30, 2016, <https://ny.curbed.com/2016/8/30/12713484/upper-west-side-riverside-center-affordable-housing>.

P.S. 199, and P.S. 452, which opened in 2010.<sup>16</sup> Future research should investigate if and how these changes have affected low-income families and their children living in the area.

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor, “Upper West Side School Zones Changed, but Not All Parents Went Along.”