

SOCIETY

Moving to Disillusionment

THE SOURCES: “Improved Neighborhoods Don’t Raise Academic Achievement” by Lisa Sanbonmatsu, Jeffrey Kling, Greg Duncan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, as summarized in *The NBER Digest*, Sept. 2006; “Blacks at Racially Integrated High Schools Operated by the U.S. Army Produce SAT Scores Superior to Blacks at U.S. Public Schools” in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, Summer 2006.

NO MORE PERPLEXING QUESTION has beset social science and politics in the past half-century than the educational gap between African Americans and whites. From *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 to the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, every decade has brought new theories and strategies, but a persistent theme has been that better neighborhoods would produce better students. Testing the hypothesis has taken decades, and some important and sobering results are now in.

In 1962, Chicago capped a public-housing construction boom by erecting 28 towers that stood like 16-story toast slices near the shore of Lake Michigan. The huge bloc of 4,300 apartments, all inhabited by the poor, became a slum almost instantly. Activists in the War on Poverty era sued the government on behalf of resident Dorothy Gautreaux, contending that housing officials were discriminating against African Americans by concentrating them in ghettos and

refusing to build public housing in white neighborhoods. In a landmark 1976 ruling, the Supreme Court held that public-housing authorities can be ordered to place units not only in white areas but in white suburbs beyond city limits in order to relieve racial segregation. Chicago responded by helping 7,000 poor, mostly African-American families move to 100 suburban

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communities in the metropolitan area.

Initial studies promised important results. Not only had the tenants moved into more affluent and less crime-ridden neighborhoods, but their children were more satisfied with their teachers, had better attitudes about school, and were only a quarter as likely to drop out of high school before graduation as were children remaining in the segregated schools of the city. The only problem was the data: The sample sizes were small, and the movers

were not randomly chosen to represent public-housing residents.

Nearly 20 years later, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development launched a huge, expensive, randomly assigned, scientifically evaluated, long-term test of a new “Moving to Opportunity” program. Nearly 5,000 poor children in Boston, Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York were divided into three groups, according to Lisa Sanbonmatsu, Jeffrey Kling, Greg Duncan, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, of the National Bureau of Economic Research, Princeton University, Northwestern University, and Columbia University, respectively. An “experimental” group got vouchers and assistance in moving to more affluent neighborhoods. A “treatment” group got housing vouchers to move to any private apartment or home—but no help in moving into a neighborhood with less poverty—and the control group stayed in public housing.

Four years later, the researchers began checking the “experimental” children to see if their academic performance or behavior had improved compared with children left behind in the projects and nearby areas.

“The results of this very large-scale experiment indicate no evidence of improvement in reading scores, math scores, behavior problems, or school engagement overall,” the researchers report. Early results in one city, Baltimore, suggested that the program had a positive impact on children from kindergarten to sixth grade,

but a long-run analysis showed that the pupils did not sustain their gains. Overall, studies of the programs in all five cities showed “no appreciable educational or social improvement.”

The authors raise the possibility that the lack of progress may have occurred because the families didn’t move to or stay in significantly better neighborhoods than they had left. They acknowledge that while the new neighborhoods were better off economically, they were not truly affluent. Most new neighborhoods were not racially or ethnically integrated—in contrast to the ones to which the Gautreaux beneficiaries had moved. Moreover, the schools in the new places were only slightly better ranked than the ones the children had previously attended. In some cases, the families sent their children to the same schools as before they moved because they thought the children would be happier. Overall, the researchers conclude that “interventions focused exclusively on neighborhoods . . . are unable to solve the myriad problems of children growing up in poverty.”

The editors of *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, struggling to explain the similar puzzle of the educational achievement gap between black and white children, studied the SAT scores of children of military families serving overseas who attended 220 schools run by the U.S. Army in 13 countries.

They reasoned that the military schools, enrolling black and white children whose parents held similar jobs and earned similar incomes in a racially integrated culture, would

be an ideal place to test whether the segregated environment of much of the United States is responsible for the large gap between the SAT scores of blacks and whites.

“No such luck,” the magazine concludes in an unsigned article.

Black students at Army-run schools did score an average of 38 points higher than black students in public and private schools within the United States. But in 2005, the editors say, whites at Defense Department schools scored 172 points higher than their black schoolmates on the combined SAT. The average score for blacks at the DoD schools was 902 out of a possible 1600; for whites it was 1074.

It is quite likely, the editors say, that the very large scoring gap reflects residual differences in “social and economic characteristics.” They speculate that the parental educational levels of black and white children may be quite different and that black test-takers may have spent their elementary school years at inferior inner-city schools before their parents were transferred overseas. They also wonder whether black students are more likely to be the children of enlisted personnel, while more whites are the offspring of career officers.

The editors say that their primary finding, however, is that black students who are given the opportunity to study at well-financed integrated high schools are able to improve their SAT scores, suggesting that greater equality in school financing and quality in the states might at least reduce the gap significantly.

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Born in the U.S.A.

THE SOURCE: “Defining ‘American’: Birthright Citizenship and the Original Understanding of the Fourteenth Amendment” by James C. Ho, in *Green Bag*, Summer 2006.

ACCORDING TO A RECENT POLL, 49 percent of Americans believe that the U.S.-born child of an illegal alien should not be entitled to U.S. citizenship. Removing this right would take away one of the magnets drawing illegal immigrants into the country, say critics, and relieve the states and localities of costly outlays for schools and social services. Some legislators and legal scholars say it can be done. But there’s a major barrier: the Fourteenth Amendment. James C. Ho, a former chief counsel of the U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittees on the Constitution and Immigration who is now an attorney in Dallas, says, “Text, history, judicial precedent, and Executive Branch interpretation confirm” that citizenship is granted exactly as the amendment says, to “all persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof,” including the offspring of illegal aliens.

Ratified in 1868, the Fourteenth Amendment overturned one of the central holdings of the *Dred Scott* decision (1857), which had denied citizenship to the American-born child of a slave. But though the “birthright citizenship” principle is based on English common law, there was vigorous debate about including the clause in the amendment. Senator Edgar Cowan (R-Pa.), likely sensitive about a large Gypsy population in his home state, wanted to ensure that “if [a state] were overrun by another and a different race, it would have the right

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