



AMERICAN APARTHEID

Segregation and the Making of the Underclass

DOUGLAS S. MASSEY & NANCY A. DENTON

American Apartheid

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American Apartheid

To
Dr. Kenneth B. Clark
an inspiration to a generation

Preface

This book grew out of research that was originally funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in June 1984 (grant number R01-HD-18594) to undertake a systematic study of racial and ethnic segregation based on the 1980 Census. A follow-up project to examine the consequences of residential segregation was funded by the same agency in June 1987 (grant number R01-HD-22992). As work progressed on these projects, the unique segregation of black Americans stood out in ever-sharper relief, and the deleterious consequences they suffered as a result of this spatial isolation became painfully obvious.

Equally obvious was that these facts were ignored in ongoing debates about the relative importance of race in American society and the origins of the urban underclass. It seemed to us amazing that people were even debating whether race was declining in importance when levels of residential segregation were so high and so structured along racial lines, and we did not understand how the volumes of material written on the underclass could gloss over the persisting reality of racial segregation as if it were irrelevant to the creation and maintenance of urban poverty. Our research indicates that racial residential segregation is the principal structural feature of American society responsible for the perpetuation of urban poverty and represents a primary cause of racial inequality in the United States.

The book and its underlying research are really a collaborative effort of many people and institutions. First and foremost, we owe a debt of thanks to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (and hence to U.S. taxpayers) for sponsoring most of the research underlying this book, and we are particularly indebted to Dr. V. Jeffery Evans of that institute for his constant help and encouragement. The National Opinion Research Center administered the research project and we ac-

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The project also benefited greatly from a host of students and colleagues who contributed their expertise and knowledge to research during various phases of the project. Isabel García and Adelle Hinojosa were responsible for day-to-day administration and project support. Stuart Bogom, Mark Keintz, Michael Strong, and Stephen Taber provided invaluable assistance in creating the computerized data files used in later investigations, and we also benefited from the hard work of Brendan Mullan and Felipe García. Gretchen Condran compiled a special data set covering Philadelphia and collaborated in a study of segregation's social, economic, and health consequences in that city, and Eric Fong helped extend this analysis to San Francisco. Mitchell Eggers worked intensively with us to understand the determinants of urban poverty and its spatial concentration. Andrew Gross carried out research on methodological issues and contributed to studies of the causes and consequences of black segregation. Adam Bickford collaborated in a study of racial segregation within U.S. public housing, and Shawn Kanaiaupuni carried out additional research to determine the effect of project location on poverty concentration. Richard Sander worked with us on a theoretical and empirical analysis of neighborhood racial transition.

Andrew Cherlin, Katharine Donato, George Galster, Hector Cordero Guzmán, Harvey Molotch, and several anonymous reviewers gave generously of their time in reading all or some of the manuscript, and Elizabeth Gretz improved its prose through her careful editing. The comments and suggestions of these individuals greatly improved the manuscript, and they cannot be faulted for the shortcomings that no doubt remain. The book also reflects the patience and support of many friends and family members, particularly Susan Ross and John Pipkin.

We are grateful to several authors and institutions for permission to cite or quote their published materials. We thank Stanley Lieberson and the University of California Press for permission to use indices originally reported in *Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants since 1880*, © 1980

by the Regents of the University of California. We also thank Reynolds Farley, Suzanne Bianchi, Diane Colasanto, and the American Academy of Political and Social Science for permission to reprint data from "Barriers to the Racial Integration of Neighborhoods: The Detroit Case," from volume 441 of *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, © 1979 by the American Academy of Political and Social Science. We again thank Reynolds Farley, Suzanne Bianchi, and Diane Colasanto as well as Howard Schuman, Shirley Hatchett, and Academic Press for permission to reproduce data from "'Chocolate City, Vanilla Suburbs': Will the Trend toward Racially Separate Communities Continue?" published in volume 7 of *Social Science Research*, © 1978 by Academic Press. Finally, we express our gratitude to Roderick J. Harrison and Daniel J. Weinberg of the U.S. Bureau of the Census for sending us preliminary calculations of 1990 segregation indices prior to their presentation in "Racial and Ethnic Residential Segregation in 1990" at the April 13, 1992, meetings of the Population Association of America in Denver, Colorado.

To all these people and institutions we extend our deep and heartfelt thanks, and hope that the end result justifies the sacrifices that they made on our behalf.

Chicago, Illinois
March 1992

Racial segregation, like all other forms of cruelty and tyranny, debases all human beings—those who are its victims, those who victimize, and in quite subtle ways those who are mere accessories.

Kenneth B. Clark

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The Missing Link

It is quite simple. As soon as there is a group area then all your uncertainties are removed and that is, after all, the primary purpose of this Bill [requiring racial segregation in housing].

*Minister of the Interior,
Union of South Africa
legislative debate on the
the Group Areas Act of 1950*

During the 1970s and 1980s a word disappeared from the American vocabulary.¹ It was not in the speeches of politicians decrying the multiple ills besetting American cities. It was not spoken by government officials responsible for administering the nation's social programs. It was not mentioned by journalists reporting on the rising tide of homelessness, drugs, and violence in urban America. It was not discussed by foundation executives and think-tank experts proposing new programs for unemployed parents and unwed mothers. It was not articulated by civil rights leaders speaking out against the persistence of racial inequality; and it was nowhere to be found in the thousands of pages written by social scientists on the urban underclass. The word was segregation.

Most Americans vaguely realize that urban America is still a residentially segregated society, but few appreciate the depth of black segregation or the degree to which it is maintained by ongoing institutional arrangements and contemporary individual actions. They view segregation as an unfortunate holdover from a racist past, one that is fading progressively over time. If racial residential segregation persists, they reason, it is only because civil rights laws passed during the 1960s have not had enough time to work or because many blacks still prefer to live in black neighbor-

hoods. The residential segregation of blacks is viewed charitably as a "natural" outcome of impersonal social and economic forces, the same forces that produced Italian and Polish neighborhoods in the past and that yield Mexican and Korean areas today.

But black segregation is not comparable to the limited and transient segregation experienced by other racial and ethnic groups, now or in the past. No group in the history of the United States has ever experienced the sustained high level of residential segregation that has been imposed on blacks in large American cities for the past fifty years. This extreme racial isolation did not just happen; it was manufactured by whites through a series of self-conscious actions and purposeful institutional arrangements that continue today. Not only is the depth of black segregation unprecedented and utterly unique compared with that of other groups, but it shows little sign of change with the passage of time or improvements in socioeconomic status.

If policymakers, scholars, and the public have been reluctant to acknowledge segregation's persistence, they have likewise been blind to its consequences for American blacks. Residential segregation is not a neutral fact; it systematically undermines the social and economic well-being of blacks in the United States. Because of racial segregation, a significant share of black America is condemned to experience a social environment where poverty and joblessness are the norm, where a majority of children are born out of wedlock, where most families are on welfare, where educational failure prevails, and where social and physical deterioration abound. Through prolonged exposure to such an environment, black chances for social and economic success are drastically reduced.

Deleterious neighborhood conditions are built into the structure of the black community. They occur because segregation concentrates poverty to build a set of mutually reinforcing and self-feeding spirals of decline into black neighborhoods. When economic dislocations deprive a segregated group of employment and increase its rate of poverty, socioeconomic deprivation inevitably becomes more concentrated in neighborhoods where that group lives. The damaging social consequences that follow from increased poverty are spatially concentrated as well, creating uniquely disadvantaged environments that become progressively isolated—geographically, socially, and economically—from the rest of society.

The effect of segregation on black well-being is structural, not individual. Residential segregation lies beyond the ability of any individual to

change; it constrains black life chances irrespective of personal traits, individual motivations, or private achievements. For the past twenty years this fundamental fact has been swept under the rug by policymakers, scholars, and theorists of the urban underclass. Segregation is the missing link in prior attempts to understand the plight of the urban poor. As long as blacks continue to be segregated in American cities, the United States cannot be called a race-blind society.

The Forgotten Factor

The present myopia regarding segregation is all the more startling because it once figured prominently in theories of racial inequality. Indeed, the ghetto was once seen as central to black subjugation in the United States. In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal wrote in *An American Dilemma* that residential segregation "is basic in a mechanical sense. It exerts its influence in an indirect and impersonal way: because Negro people do not live near white people, they cannot . . . associate with each other in the many activities founded on common neighborhood. Residential segregation . . . becomes reflected in uni-racial schools, hospitals, and other institutions" and creates "an artificial city . . . that permits any prejudice on the part of public officials to be freely vented on Negroes without hurting whites."²

Kenneth B. Clark, who worked with Gunnar Myrdal as a student and later applied his research skills in the landmark *Brown v. Topeka* school integration case, placed residential segregation at the heart of the U.S. system of racial oppression. In *Dark Ghetto*, written in 1965, he argued that "the dark ghetto's invisible walls have been erected by the white society, by those who have power, both to confine those who have *no* power and to perpetuate their powerlessness. The dark ghettos are social, political, educational, and—above all—economic colonies. Their inhabitants are subject peoples, victims of the greed, cruelty, insensitivity, guilt, and fear of their masters."³

Public recognition of segregation's role in perpetuating racial inequality was galvanized in the late 1960s by the riots that erupted in the nation's ghettos. In their aftermath, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission chaired by Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois to identify the causes of the violence and to propose policies to prevent its recurrence. The Kerner Commission released its report in March 1968 with the shocking admonition that the United States was "moving toward two

societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”⁴ Prominent among the causes that the commission identified for this growing racial inequality was residential segregation.

In stark, blunt language, the Kerner Commission informed white Americans that “discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.”⁵ “Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans. What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.”⁶

The report argued that to continue present policies was “to make permanent the division of our country into two societies; one, largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities; the other, predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs.”⁷ Commission members rejected a strategy of ghetto enrichment coupled with abandonment of efforts to integrate, an approach they saw “as another way of choosing a permanently divided country.”⁸ Rather, they insisted that the only reasonable choice for America was “a policy which combines ghetto enrichment with programs designed to encourage integration of substantial numbers of Negroes into the society outside the ghetto.”⁹

America chose differently. Following the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968, the problem of housing discrimination was declared solved, and residential segregation dropped off the national agenda. Civil rights leaders stopped pressing for the enforcement of open housing, political leaders increasingly debated employment and educational policies rather than housing integration, and academicians focused their theoretical scrutiny on everything from culture to family structure, to institutional racism, to federal welfare systems. Few people spoke of racial segregation as a problem or acknowledged its persisting consequences. By the end of the 1970s residential segregation became the forgotten factor in American race relations.¹⁰

While public discourse on race and poverty became more acrimonious and more focused on divisive issues such as school busing, racial quotas, welfare, and affirmative action, conditions in the nation’s ghettos steadily deteriorated.¹¹ By the end of the 1970s, the image of poor minority families mired in an endless cycle of unemployment, unwed childbearing, illiteracy, and dependency had coalesced into a compelling and powerful concept: the urban underclass.¹² In the view of many middle-class

whites, inner cities had come to house a large population of poorly educated single mothers and jobless men—mostly black and Puerto Rican—who were unlikely to exit poverty and become self-sufficient. In the ensuing national debate on the causes for this persistent poverty, four theoretical explanations gradually emerged: culture, racism, economics, and welfare.

Cultural explanations for the underclass can be traced to the work of Oscar Lewis, who identified a “culture of poverty” that he felt promoted patterns of behavior inconsistent with socioeconomic advancement.¹³ According to Lewis, this culture originated in endemic unemployment and chronic social immobility, and provided an ideology that allowed poor people to cope with feelings of hopelessness and despair that arose because their chances for socioeconomic success were remote. In individuals, this culture was typified by a lack of impulse control, a strong present-time orientation, and little ability to defer gratification. Among families, it yielded an absence of childhood, an early initiation into sex, a prevalence of free marital unions, and a high incidence of abandonment of mothers and children.

Although Lewis explicitly connected the emergence of these cultural patterns to structural conditions in society, he argued that once the culture of poverty was established, it became an independent cause of persistent poverty. This idea was further elaborated in 1965 by the Harvard sociologist and then Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who in a confidential report to the President focused on the relationship between male unemployment, family instability, and the intergenerational transmission of poverty, a process he labeled a “tangle of pathology.”¹⁴ He warned that because of the structural absence of employment in the ghetto, the black family was disintegrating in a way that threatened the fabric of community life.

When these ideas were transmitted through the press, both popular and scholarly, the connection between culture and economic structure was somehow lost, and the argument was popularly perceived to be that “people were poor because they had a defective culture.” This position was later explicitly adopted by the conservative theorist Edward Banfield, who argued that lower-class culture—with its limited time horizon, impulsive need for gratification, and psychological self-doubt—was primarily responsible for persistent urban poverty.¹⁵ He believed that these cultural traits were largely imported, arising primarily because cities attracted lower-class migrants.

The culture-of-poverty argument was strongly criticized by liberal the-

orists as a self-serving ideology that “blamed the victim.”¹⁶ In the ensuing wave of reaction, black families were viewed not as weak but, on the contrary, as resilient and well adapted survivors in an oppressive and racially prejudiced society.¹⁷ Black disadvantages were attributed not to a defective culture but to the persistence of institutional racism in the United States. According to theorists of the underclass such as Douglas Glasgow and Alphonso Pinkney, the black urban underclass came about because deeply imbedded racist practices within American institutions—particularly schools and the economy—effectively kept blacks poor and dependent.¹⁸

As the debate on culture versus racism ground to a halt during the late 1970s, conservative theorists increasingly captured public attention by focusing on a third possible cause of poverty: government welfare policy. According to Charles Murray, the creation of the underclass was rooted in the liberal welfare state.¹⁹ Federal antipoverty programs altered the incentives governing the behavior of poor men and women, reducing the desirability of marriage, increasing the benefits of unwed childbearing, lowering the attractiveness of menial labor, and ultimately resulted in greater poverty.

A slightly different attack on the welfare state was launched by Lawrence Mead, who argued that it was not the generosity but the permissiveness of the U.S. welfare system that was at fault.²⁰ Jobless men and unwed mothers should be required to display “good citizenship” before being supported by the state. By not requiring anything of the poor, Mead argued, the welfare state undermined their independence and competence, thereby perpetuating their poverty.

This conservative reasoning was subsequently attacked by liberal social scientists, led principally by the sociologist William Julius Wilson, who had long been arguing for the increasing importance of class over race in understanding the social and economic problems facing blacks.²¹ In his 1987 book *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson argued that persistent urban poverty stemmed primarily from the structural transformation of the inner-city economy.²² The decline of manufacturing, the suburbanization of employment, and the rise of a low-wage service sector dramatically reduced the number of city jobs that paid wages sufficient to support a family, which led to high rates of joblessness among minorities and a shrinking pool of “marriageable” men (those financially able to support a family). Marriage thus became less attractive to poor women, unwed childbearing increased, and female-headed families proliferated. Blacks

suffered disproportionately from these trends because, owing to past discrimination, they were concentrated in locations and occupations particularly affected by economic restructuring.

Wilson argued that these economic changes were accompanied by an increase in the spatial concentration of poverty within black neighborhoods. This new geography of poverty, he felt, was enabled by the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, which provided middle-class blacks with new opportunities outside the ghetto.²³ The out-migration of middle-class families from ghetto areas left behind a destitute community lacking the institutions, resources, and values necessary for success in post-industrial society. The urban underclass thus arose from a complex interplay of civil rights policy, economic restructuring, and a historical legacy of discrimination.

Theoretical concepts such as the culture of poverty, institutional racism, welfare disincentives, and structural economic change have all been widely debated. None of these explanations, however, considers residential segregation to be an important contributing cause of urban poverty and the underclass. In their principal works, Murray and Mead do not mention segregation at all;²⁴ and Wilson refers to racial segregation only as a historical legacy from the past, not as an outcome that is institutionally supported and actively created today.²⁵ Although Lewis mentions segregation sporadically in his writings, it is not assigned a central role in the set of structural factors responsible for the culture of poverty, and Banfield ignores it entirely. Glasgow, Pinkney, and other theorists of institutional racism mention the ghetto frequently, but generally call not for residential desegregation but for race-specific policies to combat the effects of discrimination in the schools and labor markets. In general, then, contemporary theorists of urban poverty do not see high levels of black-white segregation as particularly relevant to understanding the underclass or alleviating urban poverty.²⁶

The purpose of this book is to redirect the focus of public debate back to issues of race and racial segregation, and to suggest that they should be fundamental to thinking about the status of black Americans and the origins of the urban underclass. Our quarrel is less with any of the prevailing theories of urban poverty than with their systematic failure to consider the important role that segregation has played in mediating, exacerbating, and ultimately amplifying the harmful social and economic processes they treat.

We join earlier scholars in rejecting the view that poor urban blacks