



White People's Choices Perpetuate School and Neighborhood Segregation

What Would It Take to Change Them?

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More than a century of public policies and institutional practices have built a system of separate and unequal schools and neighborhoods in the US. And a web of public policies—from zoning and land-use regulations and policing policies to school district boundaries and school assignment practices—sustain it today (Turner and Greene 2021). Substantial evidence documents the damage segregation inflicts on children of color and the potential benefits they can realize from racially integrated neighborhoods and schools (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2016; Johnson 2019; Sharkey 2013). Emerging evidence suggests that segregation may hurt white children as well, undermining their ability to live, work, and play effectively with people of color and thus their capacity to thrive in an increasingly multiracial society.

White people's choices about where to live and where to send their children to school are shaped by this entrenched and inequitable system. But their attitudes, preferences, and choices can also influence the policies that sustain the current system, either by defending policies that exclude people of color from well-resourced neighborhoods and schools or by supporting reforms that could advance greater inclusion and equity. Policymakers who want to advance neighborhood and school integration need to better understand the choices white people make to design initiatives that influence white families to make more prointegrative choices. Doing so could produce more diverse neighborhoods and schools in the near term and could expand white people's support for more structural reforms to dismantle the separate and unequal system over the long term.

All parents want what is best for their children. But many white parents may unknowingly be acting against their children's interests when they do not place sufficient weight on diversity because its value is not widely understood. And the choices white people make do not align with the desire many express for diverse neighborhoods and schools. This divergence likely stems from multiple causes. Some people are racist and do not want people of color as neighbors or peers. But many others make racially biased assumptions about the quality of neighborhoods and schools, assumptions that may be reinforced by

unreliable measures of quality. And some white families may place a high value on neighborhood or school attributes that are correlated with racial composition, making it hard to find diverse options that meet other desired criteria.

This brief summarizes research on why white people make the choices they do and why it matters for their children. Building on this evidence, we identify six opportunities for action and propose four priorities for new knowledge building that could support and accelerate efforts to “nudge” white people toward choices that make neighborhoods and schools more integrated. We are not so naïve as to think that changing the choices white people make will be sufficient to dismantle segregation or eliminate inequities in children’s outcomes. But we doubt that meaningful and sustainable neighborhood and school integration can be achieved without changing white people’s choices. Better understanding the consequences of segregation for white people and the factors influencing their choices can help advance solutions that dismantle America’s separate and unequal neighborhoods and schools.

Why Don’t More White People Choose Diverse Neighborhoods and Schools?

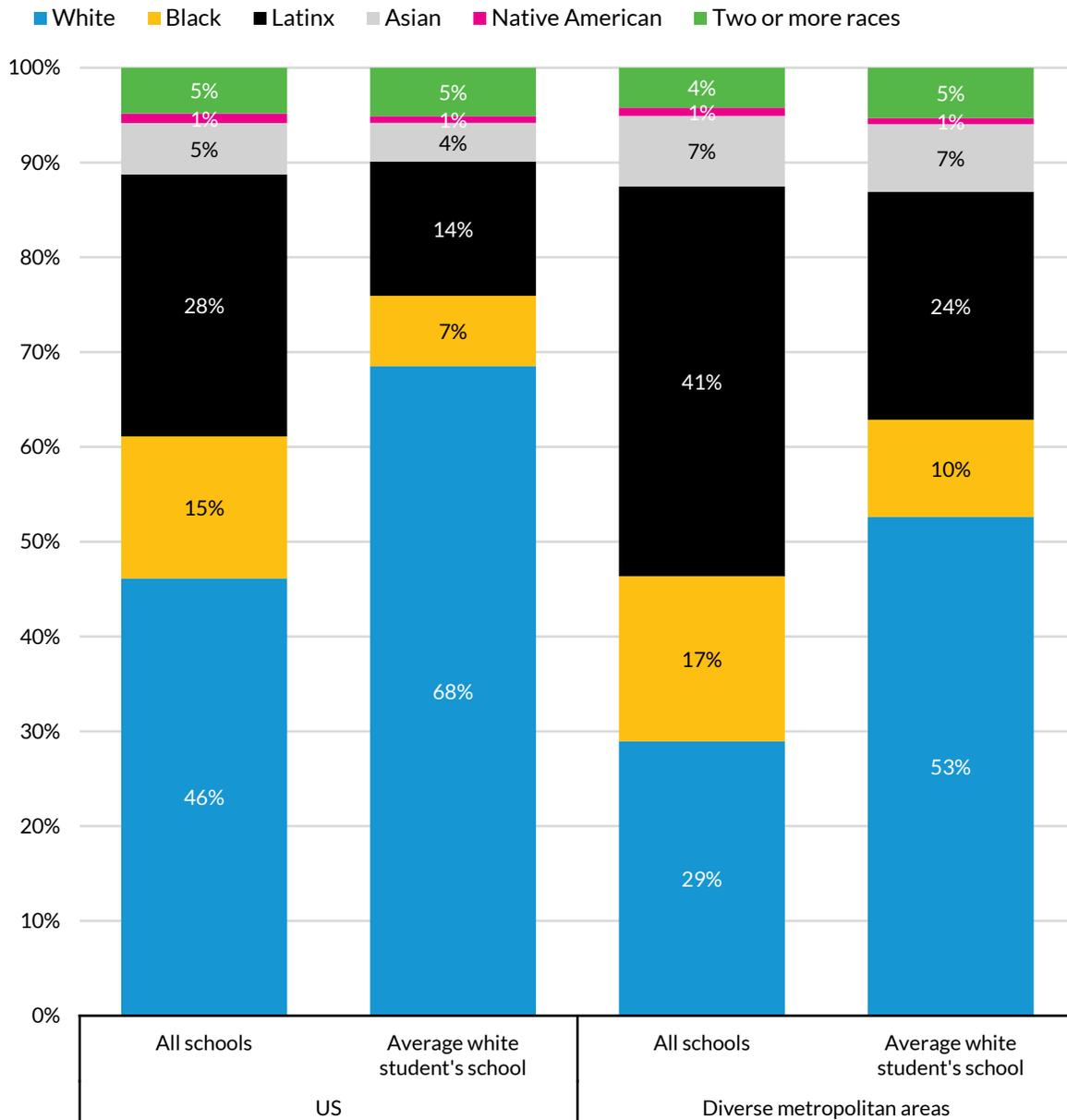
Every year, at least 1 in 10 US households moves. So individual decisions about where to live can significantly erode—or sustain—residential segregation. And when families decide where to live, they are simultaneously narrowing their landscape of school choices. In some cases, the choice of a neighborhood may determine what school a family’s children attend. But even in places with more flexible school assignment policies, residential segregation, both within and between school districts, still shapes the composition of public schools. Thus, decisions about where to live and where to send one’s children to school are inextricably linked.

Many white families express support for and openness to living in racially diverse neighborhoods and sending their children to diverse schools. Nonetheless, most choose homes in predominantly white neighborhoods and enroll their children in predominantly white schools. Even white families that choose to live in racially diverse school districts (including districts where white people do not predominate) often make neighborhood and school selections that enroll their children in the district’s “whitest” schools rather than schools that fully reflect the larger community’s diversity (figure 1). For example, only 29 percent of first-grade students are white in relatively diverse metropolitan areas, but the average white student in these areas attends an elementary school that is 53 percent white.

FIGURE 1

White First-Grade Students' Exposure to Students of Other Races and Ethnicities

Racial and ethnic composition of schools attended by the average first-grade public school student



Source: Common Core of Data, 2018–19, Education Data Portal (Version 0.10.0), Urban Institute, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://educationdata.urban.org/documentation/>, made available under the ODC Attribution License.

Notes: Diverse metropolitan areas are defined as those where the white student share is less than the national average (45.9 percent). First-grade students are examined because school assignment is generally more linked to neighborhood in elementary school than in middle school and high school. This figure does not display Pacific Islanders, who make up less than 0.5 percent of the dataset. “Latinx” refers to people who identify as Hispanic, and “Native American” refers to people who identify as American Indian.

White families' individual choices do not, of course, fully explain the persistence of separate and unequal neighborhoods and schools. Public policies, jurisdictional boundaries, and institutional practices all constrain people's choices. But even within this system, white people have considerable agency—particularly those privileged with the wealth, income, and time to realize their preferences. Local planners, school administrators, and other decisionmakers who want to encourage more prointegrative choices need to better understand the factors that research finds to be shaping white people's choices:

1. White people may implicitly make biased assumptions about neighborhood and school quality based on racial and ethnic composition.
2. They may rely on incomplete or inaccurate information about the availability or quality of diverse neighborhoods and schools.
3. They may prioritize neighborhood and school attributes that are objectively correlated with racial and ethnic composition.
4. Even weak preferences for predominantly white surroundings may result in “tipping” toward segregation.

These four factors overlap and reinforce one another, reducing the “supply” of integrated neighborhoods and schools with desired attributes and contributing to a self-perpetuating cycle that reinforces segregation. Here, we briefly summarize the evidence about each of these explanations. Much of the research on white people's attitudes and choices is now dated and may not accurately reflect 21st-century realities, including the growing racial and ethnic diversity of our country.

Implicit Bias

White people's choices may be shaped by biased assumptions they make about the implications of diversity for neighborhood and school quality. Even if they say they would be comfortable with more racial and ethnic diversity in their neighborhoods, many white people associate the presence of Black people and other people of color with poverty, danger, poor-quality schools, and declining house values (Ellen 2000). Parents also make implicit assumptions about school quality based on racial and ethnic composition, with the share of Black and Latinx¹ children playing a central role in shaping a school's perceived quality and reputation (Wells 2015).

These assumptions can become self-fulfilling prophecies because white people's wealth, political clout, and market power play such an important role in driving the investments that support neighborhood and school quality and undergird property values. When white people avoid or abandon neighborhoods or schools, they take their wealth and power with them, increasing the likelihood of deteriorating public services and private investment. Thus, white people's actions can cause tangible changes that reinforce their biased assumptions (Turner and Rawlings 2009).

Overcoming implicit biases, which families may not recognize or acknowledge, represents largely uncharted territory. We know too little about how to counteract assumptions that a neighborhood with

Black residents is probably unsafe or a school with lots of Latinx students provides poor-quality education. Neither local policymakers nor advocates for integration know enough about how to influence these assumptions at a level that might change behavior.

Incomplete Information

White families may choose less diverse neighborhoods and schools than they would prefer because they lack information about more integrated communities or rely on incomplete or inaccurate information about neighborhood and school quality. Some research suggests that white families search for housing in majority-white areas and ultimately choose predominantly white neighborhoods in part because they lack knowledge about more diverse choices that may be available to them (Card, Mas, and Rothstein 2008; Krysan 2008; Krysan et al. 2018). Real estate agents may also “steer” white homeseekers toward predominantly white places by showing them more options in these communities or assuming they would not be interested in more diverse neighborhoods. Research on housing search also suggests that white people are less likely than Black people to seek out new information about crime and school quality (Krysan et al. 2018).

Parents choose schools based largely on published measures of school quality and on word-of-mouth school recommendations they obtain through their racially segregated social networks (Holme 2002; Wells 2015). Widely available measures of school quality that rely largely on average test scores provide little insight on how much students are learning at each school or how well a school would perform for a particular child. Because children of color score lower, on average, on these standardized tests, more integrated schools typically have lower average scores than schools where most students are white.

Other measures of school quality, including metrics that reflect students’ academic growth (rather than point-in-time test performance), may give parents better information and encourage white parents to choose integrated schools. The available evidence indicates that parents tend to choose schools based on peer characteristics rather than actual effectiveness (Abdulkadiroğlu et al. 2020), but they are more likely to choose more diverse schools if they are provided with academic growth data (Houston and Henig 2019).

Objective Priorities

Families of all races and ethnicities prioritize essentially the same basic attributes in neighborhoods and schools, although they may weigh attributes differently and their ability to realize their priorities may differ. When families search for a new place to live, they consider housing and neighborhood attributes simultaneously. In other words, they try to find a house or apartment in their price range with the size and amenities they want *and* in a neighborhood with the attributes they value. Most research suggests that key neighborhood attributes include travel time to work, perceived safety, school quality, and—for homebuyers—stable or rising house values.

Decades of racial segregation, discrimination, and disinvestment have produced stark disparities between predominantly white neighborhoods and schools and those with significant shares of residents and students of color (Turner and Greene 2021). In particular, neighborhoods where Black people predominate have been starved of resources and denied essential services, including well-resourced public schools. As a consequence, even white families with strong preferences for racial and ethnic diversity may find that few neighborhoods or schools offer both diversity and the objective qualities they value. Policymakers and practitioners seeking to promote neighborhood and school integration need up-to-date maps that overlay the racial and ethnic composition of neighborhoods with information about schools, safety, house values, and other key objective attributes.

Evidence about how school quality affects neighborhood choice, however, is mixed and incomplete. Parents may not see school as a one-time choice or as completely determined by their neighborhood. The link between residential location and school assignment typically weakens from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. Moreover, white parents may enjoy the “privilege of risk,” meaning they can send their children to a school knowing that they have a safety net of financial and human capital to make sure their children do well and alternatives to turn to if they do not (Kimmelberg 2014).

Racial Tipping

Analytic models suggest that even when people prefer some racial and ethnic diversity, their individual choices may eventually lead to high levels of segregation. In the 1960s, Thomas Schelling created a stylized simulation model demonstrating that even relatively weak preferences (e.g., wanting 30 percent of your neighbors to be of your same race) eventually led to complete segregation (box 1).

BOX 1

Racial Tipping

Imagine a neighborhood that is 100 percent white in a larger region that is 15 percent Black, where a majority of both white and Black people say they would prefer neighborhoods that are 15 percent Black. Suppose one or two Black families move into the 100 percent white neighborhood. Although most of the residents are comfortable with this change, one or two white families are not comfortable and move away. Now the neighborhood aligns with the preferences of more of the Black people in the region and slightly fewer of the white people, so perhaps one or two more Black families move in and at least one white family leaves. In theory at least, this process ultimately leads to complete resegregation, with no white families remaining in the neighborhood.

Although simulation models point to the inevitability of this “tipping” process, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Today, few neighborhoods or schools are completely segregated by race or ethnicity, and some have exhibited stable integration over decades.^a Some analysts argue that the “tipping point” may shift over time.^b Others suggest that tipping points vary depending on the racial and ethnic composition of the surrounding jurisdiction or market area, income levels and social status among people of color, and the racial attitudes of white people in the larger community.^c In other words, tipping points are neither static over time nor fixed across circumstances. Efforts to promote racial integration require more current and comprehensive data about the stability over time experienced by neighborhoods with different racial and ethnic compositions, including neighborhoods that bring white people together with Black neighbors.

^aDavid Hertz, “Are Racial ‘Tipping Points’ Overblown?” City Commentary, August 24, 2015, <https://cityobservatory.org/are-racial-tipping-points-overblown/>.

^bWilliam Easterly, “Empirics of Strategic Interdependence: The Case of the Racial Tipping Point,” working paper (New York: New York University, 2004).

^cDavid Card, Alexandre Mas, and Jesse Rothstein, “Tipping and the Dynamics of Segregation,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 123, no. 1 (February 2008): 177, <https://doi.org/10.1162/qjec.2008.123.1.177>.

How Does Segregation Undermine White Children’s Chances to Thrive?

Research has consistently shown that school desegregation does not put the academic or economic well-being of white children at risk (Crain and Mahard 1978; Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin 2000; Johnson 2019). Less evidence addresses the long-term consequences for white children who attend integrated schools. But evidence strongly suggests that school integration may deliver benefits that help white students thrive in an increasingly diverse labor market and society.

Our motivation for examining how integration benefits white children is not to justify why white parents should make prointegrative choices. Ending the inordinate harms that segregation causes to children of color is more than reason enough. We also do not suggest that delivering the benefits of integration to white people is an equal imperative to delivering the benefits of integration to children of color. Rather, we shift attention to white children here because we recognize that parents with sufficient resources choose neighborhoods and schools based on what they believe is best for their

children. Understanding the long-term impacts of segregation and integration on white children can allow us to better identify the arguments and policy levers that could reorient white parents' decisionmaking toward equity.

Based on limited available evidence, we speculate that schools are the primary vehicle through which segregation affects white children, as schools are the main setting in which children interact with one another. We suspect that neighborhoods likely matter most to the extent that they determine where students go to school and to a lesser extent for facilitating contact between children within neighborhoods but outside of school, although this is a point on which more evidence is needed. Thus, we focus here on the available evidence about the effects of school composition on white students' outcomes.

Research points to three ways school integration could improve white students' ability to succeed in an increasingly diverse society:

1. Sustained, positive interracial contact decreases white students' prejudice toward people of color, which may better enable white people to work productively with people of color.
2. Diverse schools yield other intellectual, social, and civic benefits for white children that are critical for success in education, the labor market, and society.
3. Exposure to integrated settings in childhood reduces white people's racial and ethnic isolation in work and neighborhood settings, delivering the benefits of integration across the life cycle and generations.

Here, we briefly summarize the evidence underlying these hypotheses.

Reduction in Racial Prejudice

As America continues to diversify, white people will increasingly be required to work with people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds. White people's need for high levels of comfort in diverse settings is particularly important, given the increasing share of jobs that require high levels of social interaction (Deming 2017). When white people hold racial prejudice (a primary determinant of racism and discriminatory behavior), positive interactions between racial and ethnic groups are more difficult (not to mention the harm it inflicts on people of color).

The contact hypothesis, a central sociological theory, suggests that intergroup contact can reduce racial prejudice under the right conditions. This impact may be reflected by reduced feelings of anxiety, increased empathy, changes in how people categorize each other, and the fostering of friendships across racial and ethnic lines (Dovidio et al. 2017; Pettigrew et al. 2011).

But "under the right conditions" is an important qualifier. The conditions that evidence finds are helpful (though not necessary) for positive intergroup interaction include equal status between groups, shared goals, cooperation, and institutional support. But intergroup contact can also exacerbate negative attitudes and biases, especially if the situation is stressful or threatening or if the groups did

not choose to have contact with each other (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). Some research on white students who attended desegregated schools early in the era of court-mandated desegregation from the 1950s to 1980s—when white opposition to desegregation efforts were strongest—found that racist attitudes increased (Chin 2020). In practice, reaping the benefits of intergroup contact requires structuring contact to ensure that members of different groups have real opportunities to cultivate meaningful and sustained interactions (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Tropp et al., forthcoming).

Empirical evidence on the contact hypothesis from higher education settings demonstrates the potential for integration to reduce white students' racial prejudice. Interracial contact can increase students' openness to diversity and their level of comfort with peers from different racial and ethnic groups (Chang, Astin, and Kim 2004; Chang et al. 2005; Kurlaender and Yun 2007). Importantly, cross-racial interaction may help increase white students' empathy for injustices faced by people of color. Students who attend college in diverse settings report higher levels of interest in promoting racial understanding (Chang, Astin, and Kim 2004; Gurin et al. 2002) and become more psychologically invested in the perspectives, experiences, and welfare of members of disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups (Tropp and Barlow 2018).

More limited evidence from the K–12 context demonstrates that childhood interracial contact can erode negative racial stereotypes and biases in the short term (Crystal, Killen, and Ruck 2008; Killen et al. 2010; McGlothlin and Killen 2010) and improve racial attitudes when those children become adults (Wood and Sonleitner 1996). Additionally, high school graduates who attended desegregated schools in the late 1970s were less likely to apply racial stereotypes and reported feeling more comfortable in racially diverse settings than graduates from segregated schools (Wells et al. 2005).

Though little research directly connects school integration to white people's labor market success, evidence finds that cross-racial interaction can improve students' ability to work cooperatively in diverse groups (Engberg 2007; Jayakumar 2008). This is important because racially diverse groups are more productive, creative, and innovative than racially homogenous groups (Antonio 2004; Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale 2006). Consequently, exposure to diverse schools and neighborhoods, which help produce more diverse workplaces, may help promote labor market success.

Intellectual, Social, and Civic Benefits

Higher education research demonstrates that interacting with peers in other racial and ethnic groups can improve outcomes that are critical for academic and workforce success, including critical thinking, intellectual engagement and motivation, self-confidence, and academic skills (Chang, Astin, and Kim 2004; Chang et al. 2005; Gurin et al. 2002, Hu and Kuh 2003; Luo and Jamieson-Drake 2009; Nelson Laird 2005). Interracial contact can also improve social skills such as teamwork and leadership skills, (Denson and Zhang 2010; Jayakumar 2008), which research has found have a growing labor market return (Deming 2017).

Additionally, interracial contact contributes to students' civic development. Diversity has positive effects on white students' tendency to consider others' point of view and on students' motivation to

participate in activities that affect society and the political structure (Chang, Astin, and Kim 2004; Gurin et al. 2002).

Benefits of Integration across the Life Cycle and Generations

The choices made by white families today have potentially long-lasting consequences. According to perpetuation theory, when people lack sustained experience in desegregated settings early in life, segregation repeats itself over the life cycle and in different institutional settings (Braddock 1980; Braddock and McPartland 1981).

For example, students who attend school with diverse classmates express high willingness to live and work in diverse settings in the future (Kurlaender and Yun 2005). These preferences appear to be borne out in practice—white students who are exposed to students of color are less likely to work in racially isolated settings after high school (Gamoran, Collares, and Barfels 2016; Stearns 2010).

Segregation also repeats across generations. Racial isolation in schools and neighborhoods can increase young adults' preferences for their children to have same-race schoolmates and same-race neighbors (Braddock and Gonzalez 2010). The white share of students that people experience in high school and college may explain as much as 31 percent of intergenerational continuity of neighborhood racial composition (Goldsmith 2010). Given segregation's intergenerational effects, delivering the benefits of integration to future generations of white children and children of color depends on implementing integration efforts that affect today's children.

FIGURE 2

Benefits of Integration for White People across the Life Cycle



Source: Adapted from Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, *The Reciprocal Relationship between Housing and School Integration* (Washington, DC: National Coalition on School Diversity, 2010), 1.

What Policies and Institutional Practices Could Change White People’s Choices?

Local, state, and federal public policies created and sustain segregated neighborhoods and schools. Many of these policies and practices require thoroughgoing reform to ensure that every neighborhood and school, regardless of racial and ethnic composition, provides the resources and opportunities children need to thrive and to expand the availability of diverse neighborhoods and integrated schools. A comprehensive reform strategy would tear down the barriers that exclude people of color from neighborhoods and schools already rich in resources and opportunities while also investing in long-neglected neighborhoods where so many people of color live (Tegeler and Hilton 2017; Turner et al. 2018). Such a strategy might redraw school district boundaries or reform current mechanisms for funding public schools. Or it might include reparative policies that expand the resources people of color need to choose the neighborhoods and schools they prefer—by restoring wealth denied by generations of discriminatory policies, for example.

Here, we focus on six narrower but important opportunities for action aimed at influencing the choices white families make. They offer opportunities for advocates, philanthropy, government, and the private sector to explicitly encourage white people to live in diverse neighborhoods and send their children to integrated schools. Some of the opportunities apply the principle of “targeted universalism,” providing benefits to families of all races and ethnicities who make prointegrative choices. But their central purpose is to nudge more white families toward diverse neighborhoods and schools.

1. Launch a public information campaign promoting evidence about how segregation undermines white children’s prospects for social and economic success.
2. Support local nonprofits to help families of all races and ethnicities learn about and find integrated neighborhood and school opportunities.
3. Site schools with high-quality, in-demand curricula in neighborhoods where white people do not predominate.
4. Combine investments in housing, neighborhood amenities, and schools to nurture and sustain racially integrated neighborhoods and schools.
5. Change admissions criteria at elite universities to favor students who have attended diverse schools.
6. Provide favorable mortgage terms or down payment assistance to families buying homes in neighborhoods where their race or ethnicity does not predominate.

The first two opportunities aim to change white people’s “hearts and minds” by providing information and assistance, the middle two expand the supply of racially integrated neighborhoods and schools, and the final two seek to tip incentives in favor of integration rather than segregation. All six ideas build upon the evidence about factors influencing white people’s choices and the long-term

benefits of integration for their children. But all could be strengthened by one or more of the knowledge-building efforts discussed in the next section.

Each of these policy and practice opportunities offers the potential for impact individually. But they could be mutually reinforcing if implemented together. An effective public information campaign might boost the effectiveness of changes in college admissions criteria or mortgage financing terms. And widespread replication of resource centers might increase demand for the integrated neighborhoods and schools supported by local investments. Importantly, we do not see these six opportunities as substitutes for more comprehensive, structural reforms but rather as potential complements. For example, efforts to redraw school attendance boundaries to create more integrated schools might encounter less resistance from white parents (or be less likely to trigger “white flight”) if a public information campaign about the benefits of integration were successful.

Advocacy Organizations Launch a Public Information Campaign Promoting Evidence about How Segregation Undermines White Children’s Prospects for Social and Economic Success

If white parents thought their children’s long-term success in an increasingly diverse society hinged on exposure to diverse peers and classmates, they might eschew predominantly white neighborhoods and schools rather than defaulting to them. And if white people sought more integration, the conditions of interracial contact that reduce white racism would more likely be achieved. Transformational shifts in public attitudes and behaviors have been achieved in other domains of life through well-executed and sustained information campaigns targeting, for example, tobacco use, drunk driving, gay marriage, and marijuana legalization. None of these campaigns achieved impact overnight; all were well financed and strategic. But they ultimately contributed to both individual behavior changes and accompanying policy reforms. Perhaps a comparable effort, capitalizing on evidence about the benefits of diversity for white children, could change white people’s thinking about how to set their children up for success in life. This could ultimately change individual neighborhood and school choices as well as parental opposition to structural reforms to zoning and land-use policies or school enrollment boundaries.

National Philanthropies Support Local Nonprofits to Help Families of All Races and Ethnicities Learn about and Find Integrated Neighborhood and School Opportunities

More white families might make prointegrative choices if they had ready access to information about racially integrated neighborhoods and schools. Mission-driven resource centers could provide data about neighborhood amenities, safety, commuting times, school quality, and property values for integrated neighborhoods throughout a metropolitan region, helping families find integrated neighborhoods and schools with the qualities they value. The Oak Park Regional Housing Center exemplifies this approach, working since the early 1970s to sustain racial and ethnic integration in Oak Park, Illinois. Today, the center provides rental advising, homeownership counseling and assistance, community building, and advocacy for fair housing policy and practice.² Replicating this model

nationwide might enable and encourage more white families to act on their stated preferences for diversity. Launching such an effort could be accelerated by the development of a publicly accessible database that classifies neighborhoods and schools nationwide based on a consistent typology of racial and ethnic composition, as well as by improved measures of school quality, such as those that emphasize growth and long-term outcomes.

School Systems Site Schools with High-Quality, In-Demand Curricula in Neighborhoods Where White People Do Not Predominate

White parents who have not chosen to live in diverse neighborhoods may nonetheless enroll their children in racially integrated schools that offer special curricula or other attributes they value. School districts could site high-demand schools—potentially featuring foreign language immersion, visual and performing arts, and science and technology—in neighborhoods where they will attract diverse enrollment. These schools could be part of the traditional system of district schools or “choice” schools such as charter or magnet schools. Charter schools have had some success at increasing white enrollment in urban school districts (Monarrez, Kisida, and Chingos 2020), but charter schools and other choice schools are generally not an overall force for integration unless explicitly designed with that purpose (Chingos and Monarrez 2020). Local policymakers looking to advance this strategy need more information about the circumstances that have helped create and sustain stably integrated schools, including investments in school programming, assignment policies, neighborhoods, and measures of school quality. In addition, careful attention must be given to protecting the interests of children of color as a school’s white enrollment rises, to ensure that the benefits of integration accrue to all the students.³

Local Governments Combine Investments in Housing, Neighborhood Amenities, and Schools to Nurture and Sustain Racially Diverse Neighborhoods and Schools

Reversing America’s history of systemic disinvestment in communities of color and racialized assumptions about diverse neighborhoods and schools requires direct intervention. Local governments could strategically direct investments in high-quality schools, housing, safety, transportation, and other amenities to previously disinvested neighborhoods where white people do not predominate and to neighborhoods experiencing growing diversity. These investments could expand the supply of diverse neighborhoods and schools with the qualities all families value and short-circuit the vicious cycle of racial tipping and disinvestment that can undermine the stability of diversifying neighborhoods (Turner and Rawlings 2009). But these investments must guard against runaway gentrification and displacement by preserving affordable housing, local businesses, and cultural assets. In addition, community-building investments that help neighbors from diverse backgrounds overcome their fears and suspicions and build positive social relationships across racial and ethnic lines may also strengthen and stabilize newly diversifying neighborhoods (Stolle, Soroka, and Johnston 2008). Local policymakers considering this strategy need more information about the experiences of stably integrated neighborhoods and schools, including the investments, policy reforms, and narrative changes that have

contributed to success in school programming, assignment policies, neighborhoods, and measures of school quality. Federal policies could both provide incentives for and supplement local investments aimed at expanding and stabilizing the supply of diverse neighborhoods that offer the qualities families value.

Elite Universities Change Their Admissions Criteria to Favor Children Who Have Attended Diverse Schools

Many affluent white parents place a high premium on maximizing their children's prospects of winning acceptance to elite universities. If they understood that attending integrated elementary and secondary schools would increase the likelihood of acceptance to highly regarded postsecondary institutions, it might influence their decisions about where to buy a home and where to send their children to school. Many universities have articulated their recognition of diversity's importance to academic excellence and how it is consistent with their educational mission. Admissions offices could prioritize the recruitment and enrollment of students who have attended diverse elementary and secondary schools or students who have the kinds of competencies that are most likely to be developed in such schools (Chambers, Boger, and Tobin 2008). Universities considering this action would benefit from expanded evidence about the long-term benefits to children of all races and ethnicities of attending integrated schools, including evidence about how these benefits might vary with the racial and ethnic composition of a school and the timing or duration of a student's attendance at an integrated school.

Financial Institutions Provide Favorable Mortgage Terms or Down Payment Assistance to Families Buying Homes in Neighborhoods Where Their Race or Ethnicity Does Not Predominate

Favorable financing terms that make homeownership more affordable (and potentially contribute to equity gains) could encourage more people of all races and ethnicities to make prointegrative choices. Financial institutions work with local, state, and federal agencies to offer down payment assistance and below-market financing for first-time homebuyers to encourage homeownership in particular jurisdictions or to provide incentives for the restoration of abandoned or tax-delinquent properties. Explicitly linking mortgage financing incentives to prointegrative purchases could nudge homebuyers to look beyond their biased assumptions and move to neighborhoods that are more diverse. This approach has been applied on a small scale since the 1960s in Cleveland's eastern suburbs, with privately funded loans (Keating 1994).⁴ Private financial institutions could offer such incentives at a larger scale, and both federal and state policies could encourage and supplement them. But protections against runaway gentrification and displacement from historically disinvested neighborhoods would be essential. And institutions or agencies considering this strategy would benefit from more evidence about the number of potentially qualifying neighborhoods, prevailing house values and house price appreciation, and other indicators of neighborhood quality.

What More Do We Need to Know?

Advancing these potential solutions requires better evidence about the benefits of integration for the long-term life prospects of white children, about effective tools for expanding and sustaining integrated neighborhoods and schools, and about private-sector levers that could influence white parents' choices. New research focusing on the knowledge needs of advocates, policymakers, and practitioners could accelerate these potential solutions and identify others aimed at influencing white people's choices and dismantling the system of separate and unequal neighborhoods and schools built over generations.

Here, we identify four opportunities for knowledge building to accelerate solutions.

Measure the Long-Term Impacts for White People of Attending Integrated Schools

Campaigns aimed at encouraging white families to choose more diverse neighborhoods and schools would benefit from evidence documenting the circumstances under which integrated schools produce better long-term outcomes for students. But more research is needed to take a long-term perspective and examine the kinds of outcomes white parents might expect their children to achieve if they attend integrated, or even majority-minority, elementary and secondary schools.

An ambitious retrospective study might be achieved by identifying white students who attended K-12 schools with widely varying levels of racial and ethnic diversity, such as in a statewide longitudinal dataset, and surveying them in young adulthood to measure outcomes such as unconscious racial bias, feelings of anxiety in interactions with people of color, empathy toward people of color, and diversity of friendships and work relationships in addition to the standard outcomes available in administrative datasets. A longitudinal study could collect these kinds of outcomes as students progress through college and their early careers, providing evidence relevant to both K-12 and higher education (including admissions policies that seek to foster a more racially inclusive campus climate).

Such a study could not definitively estimate the causal effects of attending diverse schools (except in the rare circumstances where lotteries are used to determine admissions, such as in some school choice systems), given unmeasured differences across students and families, but it could demonstrate whether attending diverse schools (and being raised in the kind of family that makes such choices) is associated with desirable outcomes later in life, including outcomes beyond those measured in most educational studies. Such a study could also examine whether and how these relationships vary based on various family and school characteristics, such as the socioeconomic status of the white children and their peers and whether white children benefit to a greater or lesser extent from attending schools where they are in a small minority (compared with diverse schools with a more even mix of racial and ethnic groups).⁵

Develop Better Measures of School Quality

Empowering families to choose high-quality diverse schools will require better measures of school quality that are less likely to confound school quality with the effects of structural racism, as many test-based measures currently do. Quality measures based on test-score growth are less contaminated by this bias than measures based on average test scores, but such measures still have problems (e.g., they miss all learning that happens between kindergarten and third grade) and do not capture student outcomes that are not reflected on standardized tests.

Research could seek to develop more differentiated measures of school quality that provide families a sense of how students from their socioeconomic group fare (while not giving a pass to schools that fail to adequately serve students with the greatest educational needs). To be truly useful, these measures would need to look beyond test scores and other data points already collected to include the wider range of attributes that families value. Research could help policymakers understand what additional data would be most valuable and how to provide them to families, building on prior research showing that families do not appear attuned to student academic growth but incorporate such information into their decisionmaking—and choose more diverse schools—when it is presented to them (Abdulkadiroğlu et al. 2020; Houston and Henig 2019).

Developing measures of school quality that accurately capture the full spectrum of factors that parents care about would empower families to choose schools based on solid information rather than racialized assumptions. This may lead to more families realizing their preferences for choosing diverse schools.

Identify and Analyze Stable Neighborhood and School Integration

Local planners and school administrators need to know what actions they could take to prevent tipping, counteract biased assumptions about neighborhood and school quality with complete and accurate information, and expand the supply of stably integrated neighborhoods and schools. A rigorous collection of in-depth case studies focused on census tracts and schools that have achieved and maintained stable integration, particularly the integration of white people with Black people, could help fill this knowledge gap.

The first step for this research would be to develop a robust typology of racial and ethnic composition and build a national database tracking neighborhoods and schools over time. The typology should reflect not only the mix of white people with people of color but more specific and nuanced information about the integration of white, Black, Asian, Latinx, and Native American people (Turner and Fenderson 2006). A database that applies such a typology to all census tracts and public schools both retrospectively and prospectively would be a valuable resource not only for the in-depth case study analysis outlined here but for a broad range of research on racial and ethnic integration.

In-depth analysis of the circumstances that support stable integration could zoom in on a handful of urban and rural regions with different racial and ethnic compositions and histories. Within these

regions, researchers would identify census tracts and elementary schools that have maintained some reasonable degree of integration (particularly of white people and Black people) over multiple decades. They would also select comparison tracts and elementary schools in the same regions that had similar starting characteristics but did not achieve or sustain integration. Then, histories of these cases would be constructed, drawing upon census and local administrative data, newspaper and media accounts, changes in local policies and investments, relevant litigation, and interviews with public officials, community leaders, and real estate professionals.

These histories would document how much the objective quality of these neighborhoods and schools changed, how much narratives about them and perceptions of their quality changed, and trends in property values. These data would be linked to information about how much public or private institutions made investments in quality or produced or provided information about neighborhood and school quality to otherwise support people's information gathering and decisionmaking. Comparing the detailed histories of stably integrated neighborhoods and schools with those of the comparison cases and identifying similarities and differences across regional contexts would yield new insights on what it takes to achieve and maintain racial and ethnic diversity in neighborhoods and schools. Such a study could also include interviews with adults and youth of all races and ethnicities to gain their present-day perspectives on the pros and cons of their neighborhood's or school's diversity.

Estimate the Potential Effectiveness of Differing Mortgage Financing Incentives

Considerable research has established the effectiveness of down payment assistance and below-market interest rates to encourage or accelerate homeownership among households that might otherwise face affordability barriers (Goodman et al. 2018). But we know little about whether these incentives would induce homebuyers to choose neighborhoods in which their race or ethnicity does not predominate. In addition, white homebuyers (who typically hold greater wealth) might respond differently than homebuyers of color. And a well-designed prointegrative financing incentive would need to include protections against runaway gentrification and displacement.

One strategy for filling these knowledge gaps would be to launch a pilot program, testing the effectiveness of alternative incentive packages under different market conditions. Such a pilot might offer down payment assistance alone or in combination with interest rate reductions to different cohorts of prospective homebuyers, tracking both take-up and destination neighborhood characteristics for households by race, ethnicity, and income. The generosity of the incentives might be gradually increased to successive cohorts to understand implications for both potential scale and costs. Ideally, a pilot of this type would be implemented in high- and low-cost markets.

Conclusion

This line of work does not come without risks. Focusing on white people's actions and outcomes could lead to solutions that primarily benefit white people, who already benefit from racist structures and systems. And successful efforts to change white people's behavior in ways that lead to more integrated

neighborhoods and schools could further marginalize or displace incumbent families. Proximity to white people does not guarantee—and should not be the only way—that people of color gain access to well-resourced neighborhoods and schools.

Finally, structural racism cannot be overcome by individual, voluntary actions alone. Our argument is not that white people alone can fix segregation but that changing white people's choices could contribute to a larger portfolio of tools for dismantling today's system of separate and unequal neighborhoods and schools. Filling the knowledge gaps we have identified would be an important step in that direction.

Notes

- ¹ In this brief, we use “Latinx” to describe people with Latin American ancestry. We use “Latinx” instead of “Latino” to be respectful of the gender spectrum, but we acknowledge that this term has limitations.
- ² See the website for the Oak Park Regional Housing Center at <https://oprhc.org/>.
- ³ “Introducing: Nice White Parents,” *New York Times*, last updated December 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/23/podcasts/nice-white-parents-serial.html>.
- ⁴ “Racial Integration Incentives,” Harvard Kennedy School, Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation, Government Innovators Network, accessed March 9, 2021, <https://www.innovations.harvard.edu/racial-integration-incentives>.
- ⁵ There would be significant numbers of such children in large datasets; for example, the first-grade cohort from the 1998–99 school year, which will turn 30 next year, includes 12,383 white students who attended elementary schools that were less than 10 percent white and 23,276 white students who attended schools that were 10 to 20 percent white (authors' calculations from 1998–99 Common Core of Data).

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