

*A HISTORY OF
BLACK~WHITE
RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION
IN AMERICA*



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WHERE WE LIVE:

THE COLOR LINE

The color line is carved deeply and measurably across the cityscape of America in the form of racial residential segregation. Race relations are formed and maintained around the resulting structural framework of residential segregation. As Charles S. Johnson wrote in the 1940s:

The racial segregation in residential areas provides the basic structure for other forms of institutional segregation. It is a result of social and economic selection, of the direct operation of racial sanctions, and of the internal pull and cohesion of a community, and bears a significant relationship to those impersonal forces operating in the growth of a city.

Those words are no less true today. In *American Apartheid*, Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton identify residential segregation as the institutional apparatus that supports and binds together other forms of racial discrimination and subordination.

“Where We Live: The Color Line” is a series of reports addressing different facets of racial residential segregation, both nationwide and in Nashville, Tennessee. This collection, a research product of the Race Relations Institute of Fisk University, continues the legacy of Charles S. Johnson, the eminent sociologist and founder of the Race Relations Institute. It was Johnson’s vision that sociological research, academic discourse, and broad dissemination of factual information and social theory were the keys to demonstrating the entrenched system of race discrimination and thereby driving social change.



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A HISTORY OF BLACK-WHITE RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN AMERICA

We are a nation segregated residentially by race. Race is the primary determinant of where an American lives, and we tend to live apart. What's more, it certainly seems as though it has always been this way. All our lives, in all the American cities we've known, blacks and whites have for the most part lived separately, in segregated neighborhoods. Yet this has not always been so. A mere century ago, our urban areas were integrated *mélanges* of black and white neighbors.

THE URBAN MIX OF THE 1800S, AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

Before the twentieth century's problem of the color line, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, racial residential *integration* was the norm for blacks and whites, in northern as well as southern cities. It is certainly true that urban blacks suffered numerous hardships and disadvantages in the decades following the Civil War, but they were not residentially segregated from whites. Blacks and whites in post-Civil War American cities shared residential neighborhoods, and thus as well shared a common language and culture, and interacted socially and personally on a regular basis.

In northern cities, African Americans resided throughout predominantly white neighborhoods. History reveals that it was unusual for blacks to be excluded on the basis of race from white residential areas, and blacks tended to live on the same streets as whites. Indeed, blacks in the North were no more segregated from native-born whites than European immigrant groups of the same time period. Low levels of segregation led to high levels of contact, in neighborhoods and workplaces, between blacks and whites. Elite black professionals and business people interacted frequently and amiably with whites of similar accomplishment, and blacks of lower social status also interacted frequently, albeit less intimately, with whites.

In the South, African Americans resided widely throughout city neighborhoods, and were actually more likely to be living next to whites than next to other African Americans. In fact, residential areas of southern cities were even less racially segregated than those of the North.



Despite twenty-first century perceptions, blacks and whites commonly shared residential areas in the late 1800s.

The high degree of urban integration in the South was accompanied, however, by social and economic subordination, and this was later solidified by the emergence of the Jim Crow system, a set of formalized requirements and informal expectations designed to assure the inferior status of African Americans. Nevertheless, despite their unequal status, blacks in southern cities in the latter 1800s, by virtue of living side by side with whites, regularly interacted with whites.

Nashville's residential pattern in the latter part of the 1800s reflected the residential integration of the time. Bobby

Lovett, in *The African-American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780-1930*, has reported that after the Civil War, black Nashvillians became scattered in neighborhoods in all sections of the city (Lovett, 1999). Figures from the 1870 census reveal the residential integration of that time: an interracial residential pattern prevailed throughout the city. Lovett identified six areas in Nashville that were more heavily populated by African Americans, but even those neighborhoods were remarkably integrated, by today's standards. For example, the two census tracts in the late 1800s with the highest proportions of African-American residents were only about 50% black and 50% white. In contrast, as of the year 2000, 30 Nashville census tracts are more than 50% black, and 18 of those are more than 80% black.

Thus, pre-1900 Nashville in this regard typified most American cities of the South and the North. Black residents and white residents shared streets and neighborhoods throughout the city. Certain areas of the city could be identified as places where many African Americans lived, but these areas were not predominantly African-American, and most African Americans did not live in them. Even as Jim Crow began to emerge, in the 1880s and 1890s, Nashville's working-class blacks and whites continued to live near one another, and there were integrated areas all over the city.

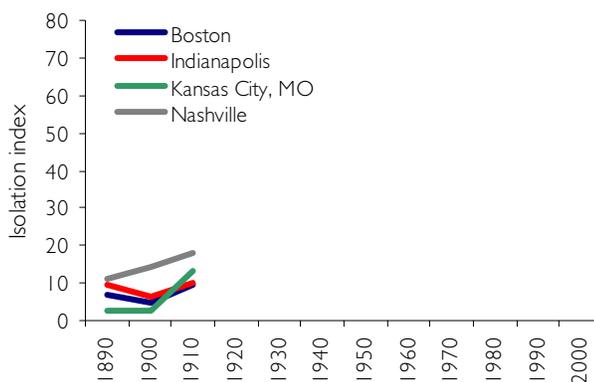
How did such racially interspersed neighborhoods, in Nashville and in cities across the United States, become the segregated areas of today? What forces transformed the residential mix and carved the color line across our cities?

THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, AND A TURN TOWARD SEGREGATION

The post-Civil War prevalence of urban integration—blacks and whites residing among one another in a scattered fashion throughout American cities and in a more concentrated pattern in enclaves—began dissipating just before the 1900s. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* legitimized the doctrine of “separate but equal” facilities and institutions for blacks and whites. The twentieth century ushered in the complimentary trends of industrialization and blacks' rural-to-urban migration, elevating tensions in race relations and heralding the beginning of a steady rise in residential segregation between blacks and whites.

In the North, industrialization transformed large areas of cities into burgeoning manufacturing districts filled with large and small factories and plants, and dense housing for the requisite work force. Streets once lined with homes and small shops became blocks of teeming tenements and row houses. Meanwhile, blacks from the South had begun to migrate north by the tens of thousands in the final decade of the 1800s, and they filled the new demand for labor and changed the face of the urban streetscape of northern cities. Nearly 200,000 southern blacks moved north between 1900 and 1910, and the

Rise of black-white residential segregation, 1890 - 1910



All three graphs in this report are drawn from data in Cutler, Glaeser, & Vigdor (1999) and Glaeser & Vigdor (2001).

outbreak of World War I further fueled the dual trends of industrial development and the black migration to the North.

Heightened racial tensions arose from the confluence of industrialization, the consequent housing density, and the large proportional increase in black population experienced by whites in northern cities. From 1900 through the 1920s, as residential segregation increased, northern cities saw repeated and often large-scale incidents of racial violence. Individual blacks were beaten, shot, or lynched; African-American homes were invaded, burned, or bombed; white gangs asserted a threatening presence in city streets; and race riots periodically broke out in city after city. The threat of violence, in turn, propelled even more segregation, as whites became increasingly intolerant of African-American presence in their neighborhoods and as blacks increasingly sought comfort and security in neighborhoods with other blacks.

Southern cities, meanwhile, experienced racial violence in the early 1900s but were not afflicted by large-scale race riots, and residential segregation increased at a slower rate. There was less intense industrialization and greater reliance on the Jim Crow system of racial subordination; ironically, the very system which elevated whites' status by subordinating blacks allowed for more integrated residential patterns. Charles S. Johnson, reflecting on the more integrated residential patterns in southern cities, noted that African Americans' "place [was] so well defined in social space that their location in ecological space [did] not loom as a great issue. In the North, however, where their social status [was] more anomalous and where they [had] no customary place in the community," their place of residence was more fraught with meaning and potential and thus tended to be more segregated (Johnson, 1943).

Race relations and residential patterns in the postbellum era were defined and then transformed by societal and economic shifts, and the turn of the century was most remarkable for its huge technological and demographic changes. The ensuing early decades of the 1900s ushered in ever-increasing black-white residential segregation and an ever-hardening color line, fueled particularly by racial prejudice expressed through violence.

As the twentieth century color line formed and hardened, it is important to note that black segregation has been a unique phenomenon among urban residential patterns. Other racial and ethnic groups in the United States have certainly been residentially segregated, but non-black ethnic enclaves have been fundamentally different from those of African Americans.

Immigrant enclaves, despite their particular ethnic identity, have actually been heterogeneous with a wide variety of ethnic groups, and most immigrants have not resided in the immigrant enclaves. Studies over time have shown that non-black ethnic enclaves have existed as transitional springboards; through the years and generations, the forces of socioeconomic advancement and cultural assimilation have propelled residents out of the ethnic enclaves. For African Americans, by contrast, the residential color line—formed and maintained through a constellation of private, institutional, and governmental initiatives targeted specifically at blacks—continues to be a largely insurmountable hurdle, perpetuating the segregation through decades and generations.

The phenomenon of segregation may be measured along five different dimensions, reflecting specific characteristics of segregation, such as how evenly distributed a group is throughout a city, how isolated one group is from another, or how centralized a group is within the urban core. Nationwide, blacks are more segregated than any other group on any single dimension of segregation. Moreover, African Americans are the only demographic group in the United States that experiences a high degree of segregation on at least four of the five dimensions at once, a pattern termed "hypersegregation" (Massey & Denton, 1993).

INSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNMENTAL METHODS OF CARVING THE RESIDENTIAL COLOR LINE

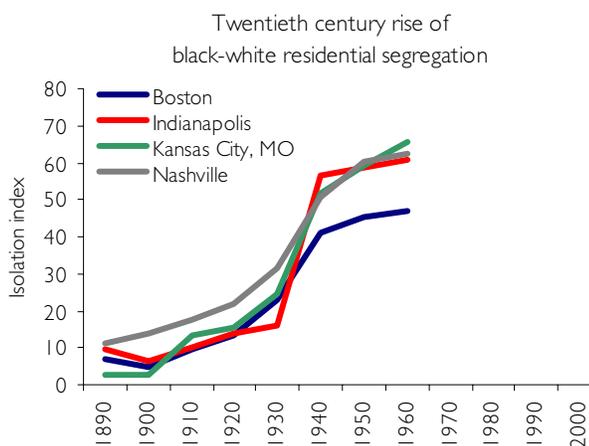
Industrialization and demographic shifts may have wrought the initial trend toward black-white residential segregation, but for most of the twentieth century, the avenues for residential segregation have been institutional and governmental. Through private organizational means—such as neighborhood associations, restrictive covenants, real estate boards and other real estate industry policies—and governmental approaches—such as legislation, federal government lending programs, urban renewal, the interstate highway system, and even local zoning controls—the color line has been carved in the urban landscape. On these multiple fronts, racial fears and prejudices have been expressed and the color line of residential segregation has been forged and maintained.

For several years in the early 1900s, whites in many southern cities began legislating residential segregation through city ordinances. Typically, such laws actually dictated where blacks and whites could and could not live, and were buttressed by the expressed purposes of preserving public welfare and even improving race relations. Their effect was, of course, to separate black and white residents. Although segregation ordinances were first declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1915, cities continued for several years to attempt to force residential segregation through legislation.

Neighborhood associations, formed typically by middle-class urban whites, were a common method for maintaining the black-white color line in residential segregation. Throughout city after city, these organizations worked toward their primary goal of preventing the movement of African Americans into white neighborhoods, through a variety of efforts. They lobbied city governments for the passage and enforcement of discriminatory ordinances, for the closing of streets where blacks resided, and for the closing of hotels and rooming houses frequented by blacks. Through fundraising and donations, they purchased property from black homeowners in their neighborhoods, bought property from owners who were renting to blacks, bought vacant homes, and paid money to black renters who agreed to move away. Neighborhood associations also brought lawsuits against real estate agents who sold homes to blacks, organized demonstrations against blacks moving in, and boycotted white businesses and real estate agents patronized by blacks.

Real estate boards were another organizational structure for the maintenance of the black-white color line. The National Association of Real Estate Brokers proclaimed in its code of ethics that “a Realtor should never be instrumental in introducing into a neighborhood...members of any race or nationality...whose presence will clearly be detrimental to property values in that neighborhood.” Local real estate boards across the country followed suit. These local boards played the critical role of creating racially restrictive covenants for use by white homeowners and white neighborhood associations.

Race restrictive covenants were collective, contractual arrangements between property



owners and their neighborhood associations, through which property owners agreed not to permit blacks (and other ethnic groups) to purchase, rent, or otherwise occupy their property. Such covenants were in widespread use throughout the country from 1910 until they were declared unconstitutional in 1948, and even continued to be recorded and applied for up to two decades beyond the time they were outlawed by the Supreme Court.

Four decades of legally enforceable race discrimination in housing, in the form of restrictive covenants, carved the color line deeply across American cities and towns. In the first half of the twentieth century, according to Kevin Fox Gotham, “racial identity and racial difference assumed a material dimension imposed onto the geography of the city by the emerging real estate industry through the use and enforcement of racial restrictive covenants and the creation of exclusionary homeowner associations” (Gotham, 2002). In addition to the tangible geographic divisions, the actions and initiatives of local private institutions wrought a less visible but equally powerful aspect of segregation: a racial ideology. This ideology portrayed blacks as harmful to neighborhood stability, desirability, and property values.

The intent and effect of restrictive covenants found new life, beyond their unenforceability, in other, more modern methods of creating and perpetuating residential segregation. Numerous studies throughout American cities have substantiated the ongoing institutionalization of residential segregation by white discriminators in the real estate, banking, and insurance industries. A multitude of techniques—from the profit-oriented “blockbusting” methods of the mid-1900s to the racial “steering” that continues to this day, as well as racial and economic neighborhood profiling and marketing databases—have manipulated the residential mix and effectively keep black residents out of white neighborhoods.

Not long after private institutions began carving the color line across American municipalities, the United States government also joined in the sponsorship of residential segregation through the creation of what came to be known as “redlining”. Beginning in 1933, the federal government sought to make home ownership an attainable goal for Americans through accessible, long-term mortgage financing arrangements. The government created a ranking system for urban neighborhoods, to determine whether or not to offer financing. Under this system, neighborhoods with black residents were redlined: that is, they were categorized as “hazardous”, undesirable, and therefore ineligible for mortgage loans.

By denying home lending opportunities to integrated neighborhoods and predominantly black neighborhoods, while at the same time providing such opportunities to whites, the United States government officially adopted standards of racial discrimination in housing. According to Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, “it bureaucratized them and applied them on an exceptional scale. It lent the power,

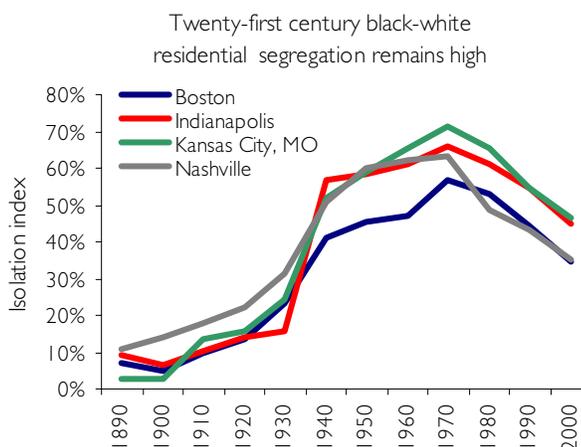
The United States government's initial foray into the home finance business was through the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), in operation from 1933 through 1935. The HOLC spawned a nationwide appraisal system for residential property, in which every American city block received one of four ratings, with the top grade going to new, all-white neighborhoods and the lowest grade (coded in red ink) assigned to predominantly black neighborhoods.

Ensuing government loan programs—the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created in 1937, and the Veterans Administration (VA), started in 1944—adopted the HOLC model of categorizing neighborhood quality on the basis of whiteness. Under these programs, homeowners in the redlined category, as well as in the next-lowest category (which included racially mixed neighborhoods) virtually never received home loans.

prestige, and support of the federal government to the systematic practice of racial discrimination in housing” (Massey & Denton, 1993).

In turn, of course, private banks adopted the federal government’s residential categorizations and redlining approach, meaning that virtually the entire mortgage lending system—both government and private sectors—excluded most neighborhoods with African-American residents from their financing services. *Home ownership was tied to financing, and financing was tied to race.* Thus, virtually the entire residential market was undergirded and largely segregated by the officially sanctioned and ubiquitously replicated standards of racial discrimination.

The federal and, in some cases, local government adopted other policies relating to housing that further cemented the color line. Urban renewal, begun in 1949, effectively removed hundreds of thousands of African Americans residing in affordable urban housing located in city centers, and relocated them into poor, crowded neighborhoods or racially segregated public housing. Local governments, through their autonomous zoning powers—granted them by their state legislatures and



upheld by the United States Supreme Court—enacted laws securing homogeneity of wealth and class. The interstate highway system, embarked upon for reasons of commerce and national security, effectively erected concrete racial barriers between black and white neighborhoods in many cities, as well as enabled phenomenal suburban development at the expense of urban centers.

THE COLOR LINE REMAINS

Despite the common assumption that racial residential segregation has always been with us, residential segregation is a modern, twentieth century, institutionally generated phenomenon. White racial prejudice, private profit-oriented initiatives, and large-scale governmental policies combined to produce the residential segregation of the twentieth century. Residential segregation between blacks and whites steadily increased for the first seven decades of the twentieth century. Moreover, countervailing trends—including the civil rights movement, the Fair Housing Act of 1968, the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act of 1975 and its ensuing amendments, the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977, Housing and Urban Development’s Hope VI program of the 1990s, the emergence of a large black middle class population, and the seemingly improved racial attitudes of whites—have evidently done little to erase the residential color line. Since 1970, levels of black-white segregation have begun to decrease, but only slightly. Thus, American cities at the dawn of the twenty-first century are left with deeply carved and seemingly intractable racial residential segregation.

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The Race Relations Institute was established at Fisk University in 1942 with the dual and overlapping aims of scholarship and advocacy. The Institute's founder, the preeminent sociologist Charles S. Johnson, wished to deepen the academic understanding of racial relations and bring to as wide an audience as possible an awareness of the origins and effects of racial misconceptions and racially biased policies and practices. The Institute became a nationally renowned social science research center which produced innumerable studies of racial inequality and convened countless discourses on various facets of race relations. The focus has been not only on Nashville and the South, but on the state of race relations at national and international levels as well. The work of the Institute has always been grounded in the fundamental goal of driving social change and social justice through the presentation and analysis of factual material and social theory.