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# Poverty and Discrimination: Notes on American Apartheid

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## POVERTY AND DISCRIMINATION: NOTES ON *AMERICAN APARTHEID*

Issues involving race, poverty, and discrimination are the daily fare of constitutional scholars, yet few of us have time to keep up with the social science research on these topics. At erratic intervals, *Constitutional Commentary* has published brief updates on this research in the *But Cf* section. What follows is a contribution to this irregular series of communiqués from the research front.

*American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*, by Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton, is a significant recent contribution to the literature on race and poverty. It offers an interesting synthesis of conservative and liberal ideas about the underclass, though the final product has a distinctly liberal slant.<sup>1</sup>

Briefly, Massey and Denton view residential segregation as the key to understanding the current status of American blacks in general and of the black underclass in particular. They view segregation as primarily attributable to white avoidance of (and discrimination against) blacks, rather than black solidarity. The result of residential segregation is that blacks are disproportionately concentrated in closed urban communities. Even without this concentration, blacks would still be at an economic disadvantage due to a comparative lack of skills and education. But residential segregation concentrates disadvantaged blacks in clusters where problems like unemployment, lack of education, crime, and illegitimacy become not merely individual problems but self-reinforcing community characteristics.

Even readers who are unpersuaded by this argument will find the book an invaluable source of empirical information. Some of the most interesting evidence in the book consists of a comparison of blacks with other minority groups.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, “[d]espite their immigrant origins, Spanish language, and high

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1. For other commentary on the book see *Review Section Symposium*, 19 *Law & Social Inquiry* 407 (1994).

2. The legal literature on race would benefit from consideration of such comparisons. Far too much legal scholarship seems to assume either that all minorities are fungible or that all are black. See Daniel Farber, *The Outmoded Debate Over Affirmative Action*, 82 *Cal. L. Rev.* 893 (1994).

poverty rates, Hispanics are considerably more integrated in U.S. society than are blacks.” Unlike blacks, “within most metropolitan areas, Hispanics and Asians are more likely to share a neighborhood with whites than with another member of their own group.” For example, in San Francisco, where the three groups are about the same size, an index of racial isolation—where a score of 100% means that every black lives in an entirely black neighborhood for example—placed blacks at 51%, compared with 19% and 23% for Hispanics and Asians<sup>3</sup> respectively. In general, Massey and Denton report, “[n]o other group in the contemporary United States comes close to this level of isolation within urban society.”

Most notably, for blacks as opposed to Hispanics or Asians, higher income does not translate into residential integration. Hispanics and Asians become progressively more integrated as their income and education rises. Not so for blacks. Social class plays a relatively minor role in explaining black segregation. In Los Angeles, for example, the largest barrio in the country, “the *poorest* Hispanics were less segregated than the *most affluent* blacks.” Even affluent blacks are more likely than members of other groups to live in neighborhoods and attend schools with substantial numbers of the poor. “For blacks, in other words, high incomes do not buy entrée to residential circumstances that can serve as springboards for future socioeconomic mobility; in particular, blacks are unable to achieve a school environment conducive to later academic success.”<sup>4</sup>

Massey and Denton argue that the differences in segregation can affect the entire character of the community. A telling example comes from a study of the North Lawndale neighborhood on the West Side of Chicago. This neighborhood, we are told, contains “48 state lottery agents, 50 currency exchanges, and 99 licensed bars and liquor stores, but only one bank and one supermarket for a population of some 50,000.” The comparison with a Hispanic neighborhood is worth quoting:

In contrast, Mexican Americans in Chicago are considerably less segregated, and their core neighborhood of Little Village, immediately adjacent to North Lawndale, remained a beehive of commercial activity through the 1970s and 1980s despite the economic recession. The Little Village shopping district continues to house a variety of supermarkets, banks,

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3. And this in a city that is world-famous for its Chinatown.

4. Massey and Denton report that the high concentration of poor children in a school caused by segregation results in measurable declines in test scores.

restaurants, bakeries, travel agents, butchers, auto shops, hardware stores, and other retail outlets. The difference between North Lawndale and Little Village cannot be explained by the wave of factory closings that occurred on the city's West Side between 1950 and 1980, because these economic shocks undermine the well-being of Mexican Americans as well as blacks and the two neighborhoods are separated by only a few hundred yards.

Massey and Denton go on to argue that these differences are caused by residential segregation. North Lawndale is entirely black, while Little Village is about one-quarter non-Hispanic. As a result, "the economic dislocations of the 1970s brought an acute withdrawal of income from North Lawndale, pushing it well beyond the threshold of stability into disinvestment, abandonment, and commercial decline; but the same economic troubles brought only a moderate concentration of poverty in Little Village, leaving it well shy of the tipping point."<sup>5</sup>

The phenomenon they describe is something like the catastrophe theorized by physicists in which an increasing concentration of stellar mass suddenly leads to a collapse of space itself. Similarly, high concentrations of the disadvantaged can lead to a social implosion—and it may be almost as hard to escape from this socioeconomic trap as from a collapsed star. Both situations exhibit what mathematicians would call nonlinearities, meaning that doubling the concentration of poor people makes a neighborhood something more than twice as bad to live in for poor and nonpoor alike. One of these feedback effects involves boarded-up buildings. Increased segregation can cause an increase in the percentage of boarded-up buildings close to the tipping point at which a cycle of disinvestment, decay, and arson takes hold.

In viewing discrimination as a crucial part of the cause of black disadvantage, Massey and Denton take a liberal perspective. But, like conservatives, they also attribute disadvantage to other factors: initial differences in skill and education (which become magnified by residential concentration), and a pathological culture created in part by severe isolation and hyperconcentrated poverty.

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5. One suspects that the difference in neighborhood integration (25% versus about zero) was not the *only* factor leading to this dramatically disparate outcome. Moreover, it is also possible the causal effect runs partly in the other direction. That is, it may be that the greater commercial vitality of Little Village has both helped to maintain integration and cushioned economic blows from outside.

The extent of ghetto isolation and concentration is startling. Many residents of Chicago's South Side have never in their lives been to the Loop, and many have never left their neighborhood at all. And those neighborhoods are overwhelmingly black in composition. Massey and Denton compute an index of residential isolation in which a score of 100% means that every black lives in an entirely black neighborhood. A score of 75% indicates "a very profound degree of isolation that is roughly 20 points above the highest level ever recorded for any European ethnic group." On this scale, in 1980 Chicago received a score of 83%. On another scale measuring segregation, Chicago received a score of 92%—meaning that 23 out of every 25 blacks would have to move for the city to be fully integrated. In Philadelphia, a similarly segregated city, researchers found that blacks were "very unlikely to report friendships with anyone else but blacks, and this remarkable racial homogeneity in their friendship networks was explained entirely by their residential concentration; it had nothing to do with group size, birthplace, socioeconomic status, or organizational membership." In short, Massey and Denton report,

Typical inhabitants of one of these ghettos are not only unlikely to come into contact with whites within the particular neighborhood where they live; even if they traveled to the adjacent neighborhood they would still be unlikely to see a white face; and if they went to the next neighborhood beyond that, no whites would be there either. People growing up in such an environment have little direct experience with the culture, norms, and behaviors of the rest of American society and few social contacts with members [of] other racial groups. Ironically, within a large, diverse, and highly mobile post-industrial society such as the United States, blacks living in the heart of the ghetto are among the most isolated people on earth.

This degree of isolation, Massey and Denton believe, has had particularly negative effects on poor blacks. They report two ghetto studies by sociologist Elijah Anderson: a Chicago study from the early 1970s and a Philadelphia study from the late 1980s. The 1970s study found that middle-class values such as honesty, hard work, and respect for authority were still commonly expressed by ghetto blacks. Respect was accorded to "old heads" (black men with stable incomes and families) and "neighborhood mothers" (black women who took on responsibility for the behavior of children on the streets). By the 1980s, however, neither group was continuing to function as role models. In place

of traditional values, a drug culture had taken hold. Marriage had also disappeared as a viable institution, and a man who married his pregnant girlfriend was considered "a chump, a square, or a fool."<sup>6</sup> For women, on the other hand, men were mostly significant as a means to enter the "baby club" of young mothers who attained status from parenthood. And, as other studies report, success in school was grounds for being a labelled a "pervert brainiac."<sup>7</sup>

Being poor is never good, but it is worse to be a poor person living in a poor neighborhood. Statistically, growing up in a poor black area lowers male earnings by 20-25%. Living in such a neighborhood also raises the teenage pregnancy rate. Segregation intensifies these effects by forcing the black poor together, while also harming nonpoor blacks by immersing them in poor neighborhoods. Residential segregation functions as a catalyst, magnifying the social effects of poverty.

Although they may have somewhat exaggerated its causative potency, Massey and Denton do convincingly show that residential segregation has played a significant role in the creation of the underclass. But what causes segregation?

According to Massey and Denton, the basic cause of residential segregation is a sharp difference in housing preferences, first pointed out by economist Tom Schelling. Both blacks and whites favor residential integration, but they have different ideas of what constitutes integration. Blacks strongly prefer to live in neighborhoods that are about half black, while whites was unwilling to live in neighborhoods that are more than about 10-20% black [see pp. 78-81 on actual mobility statistics]. As a result,

6. This is another area in which group differences are important:

The disappearance of marriage as a social institution was underscored by field observation [researchers] undertook in black and Mexican neighborhoods. Whereas a four-block shopping strip in one of Chicago's poor Mexican neighborhoods yielded fifteen shops that provided goods or services explicitly connected to marriage, a trip to a comparable black shopping area uncovered only two shops that even mentioned marriage, and not very prominently at that.

7. A related problem is social pressure against the use of Standard American English dialect:

For someone raised in the segregated environment of the ghetto, adopting white linguistic conventions can seem like a betrayal of black culture, a phony attempt to deny the reality of one's "blackness." As a result, black people who regularly speak Standard American English often encounter strong disapproval from other blacks. Many well-educated blacks recall with some bitterness the ridicule and ostracism they suffered as children for the sin of "talking white."

While Standard English has no intrinsic superiority, economic and academic success are difficult without fluency in this dialect. Notably, Black English is not merely a relic of the rural South but has increasingly diverged from Standard English in segregated Northern cities.

integrated neighborhoods are unstable. Indeed, contrary to Massey and Denton's view, segregation would persist even if whites were completely unable to exclude blacks from their neighborhoods. Suppose that the government reassigned everyone's housing randomly. Simply by chance, some blocks would have slightly lower percentages of blacks than average, and some would have slightly higher. Given their housing preferences, whites would be more likely to move from the high percentage blocks to the low percentage blocks, and blacks would have the contrary tendency, so resegregation would occur. Blacks would continue to move into predominantly black neighborhoods to the point where most whites would move out.<sup>8</sup> Thus, like a pencil balanced on its point, even a completely integrated housing scheme would be highly unstable.<sup>9</sup> Widespread discrimination by sellers, realtors, and finance institutions<sup>10</sup> only reinforces this effect.

Consequently, illegalizing discrimination (or even aggressively integrating housing) will not produce stable integration unless preferences change. Unfortunately, preferences may well shift in the wrong direction. Awareness of ghetto culture is likely to reinforce the negative stereotypes of blacks already held by whites. Isolation from whites and awareness of white stereotypes are likely to make blacks even more reluctant to live in heavily white neighborhoods. Thus, unless coupled with other measures to decrease racial isolation and combat social deterioration in the ghetto, residential integration will not succeed on its own as a cure for the underclass.

In short, although Massey and Denton offer some valuable constructive proposals in their closing chapter, it is difficult to be

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8. As the neighborhood became almost entirely black, it would be less attractive to blacks, but whites would be almost entirely unwilling to move there, and someone offering a house for sale (or an apartment for rent) in such a neighborhood would almost certainly get a higher offer from a black buyer (though a lower offer than the same dwelling would have received in a neighborhood closer to the optimum for either group).

9. Of course, even an unstable equilibrium can be maintained with enough skill and effort. For example, if the government controlled all individual moves, it could maintain complete integration. This seems impractical, however. Also, it is possible that complete integration would soon transform preferences, eliminating the problem, but if experience with school integration is any guide, this seems too optimistic by far.

10. Massey and Denton provide substantial evidence of such discrimination. Notably, dark-skinned Hispanics encounter substantially more discrimination than light-skinned Hispanics, so race seems to be more significant than culture as a stimulus to discrimination.

very optimistic. Vicious cycles tend to be difficult to escape, and this one is no exception.

*D.A.F.\**

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