



Center for Social Development

Brown School

| MAY 2019 | CSD PERSPECTIVE 19-25 |

Segregation and a Path Forward to Inclusion in St. Louis

By Henry S. Webber

Editor's note: *Segregation and a Path Forward to Inclusion in St. Louis* is adapted from an address given during Facing Segregation: Building Strategies in Every Neighborhood, the 2019 annual conference of the Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council, on April 12, 2019, at Central Baptist Church, St. Louis, Missouri. This Perspective is presented here through a partnership between the Center for Social Development and the council.

Thank you to the Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council for bringing us all together for a great day of celebration, reflection, and hard work. I feel energized, and I hope you do as well.

A little over 50 years ago, America declared war on segregation. The U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared by a 9 to 0 vote that separate was inherently unequal. That Court, it should be noted, was led by a former Republican governor of California. Opposition to segregation crossed party lines. Within a little more than a decade, Congress had passed and the president had signed into law the Civil Rights Act, the Fair Housing Act, and the Voting Rights Act.

It is now 50 years since these bills became the law of the land, and we have learned much during that time. We are now very clear about the negative effects of segregation on those who live in low-income neighborhoods of highly concentrated poverty. In the 1950s and

1960s, we believed that segregation was bad for kids. Now, it is an established fact.

Similarly, we now know that regional economic growth is hurt by concentrated segregation. People with choices in where to reside, particularly the young, want to live in cities that are dense and diverse. As chair of the board of the Cortex Innovation District, I recruit companies to St. Louis. Many of those companies know about our regional concentrations of poverty, and it is a barrier to recruitment. Even more companies know about the city's very high murder rate, a direct consequence of segregation and concentrated poverty. Sometimes we can overcome these negative associations, but sometimes we can't.

It is now very clear that the ability to work with diverse people and populations is a necessity for leadership in our society. In the recent affirmative action cases before the U.S. Supreme Court, many of the authors of the amicus briefs on behalf of affirmative action were Fortune 500 CEOs and senior military officers. Why? Because these leaders know that success in leadership in the 21st century requires leading diverse teams and living in and working with diverse populations.

The policy tools available to fight segregation are much better than they were 50 years ago. We now know how to implement policies like inclusionary zoning, how to design community land trusts, and how to ensure fair housing. We have not solved all of the problems of



Washington University in St. Louis

“The policy tools available to fight segregation are much better than they were 50 years ago. We now know how to implement policies like inclusionary zoning, how to build community land trusts, and how to ensure fair housing.... We need much better tools to promote **equitable development** in very disadvantaged communities, but we have made much progress.”

policy design. We need much better tools to promote equitable development in very disadvantaged communities, but we have made progress.

Unfortunately, we have also learned that human psychology makes segregation difficult to solve. As my colleague Jason Purnell has noted, we are hard wired to form tribes and to be more comfortable with those like us. We all need to work against our prejudices.

The bad news is that, despite knowing more about segregation now, including that segregation is wrong for America, we have made much less progress in reducing segregation than we would hope and want.

The most authoritative study in recent years was written by Sean Reardon of Stanford University and Kendra Bischoff of Cornell. The study concludes that segregation by race has been reduced only modestly in the past 50 years and segregation by income has actually gotten worse.¹ Economically, at least, we are engaged in what Bill Bishop has called the “big sort”: We increasingly live in areas where everyone is much like us.²

There are many reasons for this lack of progress. Federal public policy has promoted segregation, our own preference to live near people like us is a challenge, and local control of land use, an American norm, makes reform difficult. Land use decisions in the United States are, in almost all cases, made by local communities, regardless of the greater good. Suburban communities across the nation can and do set minimum lot sizes that only allow the building of single-family homes. These are often the communities that also tend to have the best school districts. The result is very

little affordable housing and continued segregation of educational opportunity.

But the real problem is public will. We and our allies have not done our job of moving public opinion, nor have we done the political work needed. I have been involved in public policy issues for over 30 years. What I have painfully learned is that politics is more important than policy because, without good politics, there is no room for good policy. National Section 8 policy is made by Congress and the executive branch of the U.S. government. Elections and advocacy determine these decisions. The decision on whether St. Louis City has inclusionary zoning is made by the city’s Board of Aldermen. They work for us.

In stressing how much politics matter, I do not suggest that deciding what to do is easy. People with strong social values and great competence will disagree. Choosing the best tactical approach to engagement is hard. But it is what we must do. This morning, we learned that an elected official will be introducing a bill banning discrimination based on a person’s source of income for housing in St. Louis County.³ We need to do everything we can to help that proposal become law.

I have one request for all of us today: that we ask three questions about all public policy proposals:

1. Does the proposed policy reduce segregation?
2. If the policy does not reduce segregation, can it be revised to reduce segregation?
3. What can I do to make the proposals I believe in become a reality?

I am realistic; sometimes there will be good reasons to support proposals that do not reduce

segregation; reducing segregation cannot be our only goal, but the question should always be asked.

We need to face facts: The St. Louis region has not achieved what it should have achieved in the last 50 years.

We each have our own ways to define success. My criteria for regional success are growth in population, growth in per-capita income, and reductions in the Black–White income gap. On all of these criteria, we are behind most large American cities. We are not at the bottom, but we are below the mean. If we were a baseball team, we would be winning 72 games a year on both growth and equity criteria. Winning 72 games does not get you into the playoffs, let alone with the World Series.

But we have made some progress in the last decade. The Cortex Innovation District has become a national model, and the Central Corridor of the City of St. Louis has strengthened considerably. LaunchCode and programs like it are opening the door of the new economy to diverse populations, and we have focused on important and productive ways to advance racial equity. But we are still not where we need to be.

Many in our region believe we cannot be what we want to be. But that is wrong. History is not destiny. I was born in 1957. Many things happened in 1957, but one of the most important was that the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles. They moved because Brooklyn was dying, because Brooklyn could not recover from massive decline in manufacturing and port jobs in New York City. We all know how that story ends: Brooklyn is now where all of the coolest kids—and firms—want to be.

Let me end with a dream for St. Louis. We are in a church; church encourages us to dream a bit.

We can move mountains if we, all of us, decide that is what we must do. What if St. Louis dedicated itself to becoming the national model for inclusive growth, growth that benefits all of us: White, Black, and Brown, rich and poor? What if the region put the same efforts into this that we put into building sports stadiums or the interstate highway system? Let us commit together to a nation without segregation and a city of equal opportunity.

Notes

¹ Reardon and Bischoff (2011).

² Bishop (2008).

³ St. Louis County, MO Bill 102 (2019).

References

Bishop, B. (2008). *The big sort: Why the clustering of like-minded America is tearing us apart*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Reardon, S. F., & Bischoff, K. (2011). Income inequality and income segregation. *American Journal of Sociology*, 116(4), 1092–1153. <https://doi.org/10.1086/657114>

St. Louis County, MO, Bill 102 (introduced April 30, 2019).

Author

Henry S. Webber is executive vice chancellor and chief administrative officer at Washington University in St. Louis. He is also Professor of Practice at the Brown School and the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, and coeditor of *Facing Segregation: Housing Policy Solutions for a Stronger Society*.

“What if St. Louis dedicated itself to becoming the **national model for inclusive growth**, growth that benefits all of us: White, Black, and Brown, rich and poor? What if the region put the same efforts into this that we put into building sports stadiums or the interstate highway system? Let us commit together to **a nation without segregation and a city of equal opportunity.**”

About the Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council

The Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council (EHOC) seeks to ensure equal access to housing and places of public accommodation for all people through education, counseling, investigation, and enforcement.

The council is the only private, not-for-profit fair housing enforcement agency working to end illegal housing discrimination in the Metropolitan St. Louis area. Operating throughout Missouri and Illinois, EHOC fights illegal housing discrimination through:

- » Education on fair housing laws for housing providers (lenders, landlords, real estate agents and insurance agents), local governmental bodies (those who should be concerned about the affects of discrimination on their communities) and the general public (especially those who are most likely to experience illegal discrimination); and
- » Enforcement actions against those who we find, through our investigations, discriminate illegally; and
- » Community outreach, by participating in grass-roots and community-based projects; working with academics, civil rights leaders, and the housing industry; and spreading the word about our services and message through public service announcements, press releases, distribution of material, and the website.

About the Center for Social Development

The Center for Social Development is a hub for implementing and testing applied social innovations that broaden well-being for individuals, families and communities. We incubate ideas that can be scaled to reach millions, and we create new fields of study to meet social needs. We also train emerging scholars and practitioners in the effective conduct of engaged social-science research.

The Center for Social Development's mission is to create and study innovations in policy and practices that enable individuals, families and communities to formulate and achieve life goals, and contribute to the economy and society. Through innovation, research and policy development, CSD makes intellectual and applied contributions in social development theory, evidence and policy.

Suggested Citation

Webber, H. S. (2019, May). *Segregation and a path forward to inclusion in St. Louis* (CSD Perspective No. 19-25). St. Louis, MO: Washington University, Center for Social Development. <https://doi.org/10.7936/1s4r-0929>



Center for Social
Development

BROWN SCHOOL AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Campus Box 1196
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, Missouri 63130-4899

csd.wustl.edu



Metropolitan St. Louis Equal Housing and Opportunity Council
1027 South Vandeventer Avenue, 6th Floor
St. Louis, Missouri 63110

www.ehocstl.org