

Abstract

Separation and Inequality: Income Segregation and the Educational Attainment Gap

Segregation has two distinct components, separation and inequality, but research rarely explicitly theorizes and measures them discretely. In this article, I articulate conceptual differences between separation and inequality as they pertain to neighborhood income segregation. Using Census data, I describe neighborhood income separation and neighborhood income inequality in the 100 most populous metropolitan areas in the U.S. from 1990 to 2014. I find that while neighborhood income separation declined, neighborhood income inequality increased. I then use the case of the income gap in educational attainment to examine the contributions of the two segregation components to educational inequality. I find that neighborhood income inequality is a more robust predictor of the income gap in college graduation than neighborhood income separation. When income inequality between neighborhoods is higher, the gap in college graduation rates between children who grew up in high- and lower-income families is larger. Neighborhood income separation is consequential for the income attainment gap when it creates substantial contextual inequality. More broadly, my results emphasize the need to theoretically and empirically examine both components of segregation to fully understand contextual inequalities.