

The Effect of Information on Parental School Segregation Preferences: Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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Abstract

Economic school segregation has proven a stubbornly persistent feature of the American public school system. Despite the large body of research on the measurement and consequences of school segregation, comparatively less is known about public opinion among parents with respect to policies to reduce economic school segregation. In this study, we conduct a survey to explore the relationship between (1) parental beliefs about the amount of economic segregation within their local school district and (2) parental preferences toward policies designed to reduce school segregation. Using experimental manipulation, we test if providing a parent with information on the amount of segregation in their district has a causal effect on their support for segregation-reducing policies. Thus, our study helps uncover whether disagreement with respect to segregation-reducing policies stems from differences in parental *beliefs* about the extent of school segregation in their district or from differences in parental *preferences* given existing amounts of school segregation.

Introduction

School segregation has proven a stubbornly persistent feature of the American public school system. Despite civil rights reforms in the 20th century and a series of court-mandated desegregation orders (some of which are still active today), racial school segregation has largely stagnated since the 1980s (Johnson, 2015; Reardon & Owens, 2014; Stroub & Richards, 2013). In contrast, economic school segregation has only grown over the past half-century, largely as a result of growing income inequality (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Owens, Reardon, & Jencks, 2016). In the United States today, the average poor¹ student attends a school with 70% poor students, whereas the average non-poor student attends a school with less than 40% poor students (author calculations using SEDA²). Schools in neighborhoods with high levels of concentrated poverty often have disproportionately fewer school resources (Bischoff & Owens, 2019), larger achievement gaps (Owens et al., 2016; Reardon, 2016), and fewer opportunities for upward economic mobility (Chetty, Hendren, Jones, & Porter, 2020).

Americans tend to underestimate the degree of contemporary economic inequality, and the amount of economic inequality in the US is growing (Cruces, Perez-Truglia, & Tetaz, 2013; Kraus & Tan, 2015; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006). In addition, though previously-enacted desegregation policies aimed at reducing racial segregation resulted in remarkable racial progress (Johnson, 2019), such policies remain politically contentious and rely on the support and compliance of White and affluent parents. A variety of factors give rise to economic school segregation, including longstanding patterns of residential segregation within a district and the district's school attendance boundary policies. School attendance boundaries are shaped by the preferences and political pressures of affluent parents (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Goyette &

¹ Definitions of economic disadvantage in the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) are drawn from *EdFacts*.

² Stanford Education Data Archive (see Reardon, Kalogrides & Ho, 2017 for technical documentation).

Lareau, 2014), so understanding the determinants of parental preferences towards school segregation may be key in understanding the persistence of segregation and potential avenues for policy solutions. Much of the existing literature on public opinion around school segregation focuses on the public's perception of racial school segregation. However, there has not been extensive exploration of public opinion focusing on parental views toward economic school segregation.

In this study, we conduct a survey experiment to examine the effect of information on the personal and policy preferences of parents towards local within-district economic school segregation. We measure parental beliefs about the levels of school segregation in their local district as well as their preferences toward policies designed to reduce school segregation. Using experimental manipulation, we test if providing a parent information about the amount of segregation in their district has a causal effect on their support for segregation-reducing policies. In doing so, we uncover whether (1) differences in parental preferences regarding economic segregation are due to incorrect beliefs about the levels and consequences of school segregation or (2) increased knowledge about segregation is largely irrelevant to parental preferences regarding economic segregation.

We limit our focus to within-district school segregation for three main reasons. First, parents typically make educational decisions for their children in a local context. Second, policies to reduce school segregation within districts are likely the “lowest hanging fruit”, as the costs of reallocating students to schools within a district are less than the costs of reallocating students to different districts within a state. Third, school segregation is strongly influenced by a district's school attendance boundary policy, which is responsive to local parental preferences as

parents exert political pressure on district administrators (Monarrez, 2020; Saporito & Van Riper, 2016).

Background

Economic inequality is rising in the United States. As a result, schools are becoming increasingly economically segregated, which in turn leads to worse educational opportunities and outcomes for students from low-income backgrounds compared to their affluent peers (Orfield, 2013; Orfield & Lee, 2005; Owens, 2018; Owens et al., 2016). From a theoretical perspective, school segregation can profoundly influence how educational opportunities are distributed among students within a district. The more extreme the school segregation, the more unequally that educational resources can potentially be allocated across racial and economic groups. Indeed, as students themselves are an important educational input (Hoffer, 1992; Sacerdote, 2011), the mere existence of school segregation entails an unequal distribution of educational resources in and of itself. A growing body of empirical work documents the negative consequences of school segregation on low-income children. Income achievement gaps are higher on average in places with higher levels of economic school segregation (Owens, 2018). In addition, economic residential segregation is negatively associated with low-income students' high school graduation rates, though high-income students' graduation rates do not vary by segregation level (Quillian, 2014). Exposure to higher proportions of poor students in school is associated with lower standardized test scores (Reardon, 2016; van Ewijk & Slegers, 2010), which have been shown to impact valued long-term life outcomes such as college completion and labor market earnings (Chamberlain, 2013; Chetty et al., 2011; Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014). While the reduction of school segregation is often framed as an issue of

improving outcomes for low-income children, there are also potential benefits for higher-income children as well. For example, exposure to other economic groups is associated with favorable outcomes and more positive views of other groups, including a decreased likelihood of discrimination and an increased willingness to socialize across economic lines (Rao, 2019). Thus, policymakers interested in reducing social and economic inequality would benefit from a better understanding of the processes that generate (and therefore might reduce) school segregation.

Perceptions of inequality & segregation

In many ways, there is a contradiction between what affluent parents report valuing and how they behave; a majority of Americans consider economic school segregation to be a pressing problem but economic school segregation continues to rise, in part due to parental choices (Center for American Progress, 2017; Reardon & Owens, 2014; Roda & Wells, 2013). Prior research indicate that affluent parents are somewhat aware of this contradiction, but concerns about highly competitive educational environments for their children prompts them to put aside considerations about segregation in order to provide the best opportunities possible for their children (Roda & Wells, 2013). However, while Americans report to caring about economic segregation as a political issue, it is also possible that they underestimate the full extent of the issue, similar to how they tend to underestimate current levels of income inequality (Hauser & Norton, 2017), overestimate social class mobility (Kraus & Tan, 2015), and overestimate their own incomes relative to the national income distribution (Cruces et al., 2013). Similarly, as with economic inequality overall, Americans vastly underestimate the extent to which racial inequality still exists today and substantially overestimate racial progress since the civil rights

era (Kraus, Onyeador, Daumeyer, Rucker, & Richeson, 2019; Onyeador et al., 2020). Therefore, it is possible that one reason economic segregation persists is an underappreciation of the degree to which segregation remains a problem, particularly in a respondent's local area. Moreover, because much of the attention brought to the issue of segregation is on racial segregation in the South, respondents in other areas of the United States may underestimate economic school segregation in their local area.

Recent research has revealed evidence that Americans tend to have an overly optimistic view of economic and racial inequality today, but the evidence is somewhat mixed on the efficacy of information treatments in influencing the average American's policy preferences related to economic inequality. For example, Kuziemko and colleagues (2015) found that while respondents update their beliefs when provided with correct information about the extent of income inequality that exists in the U.S. today, additional information did little to move preferences or support for policies to remediate inequality. In contrast, a study by Cruce and colleagues (2013) found that providing respondents with information about their own income rank relative to the national distribution significantly increased preferences toward redistributive economic policies. This was due primarily to respondents' overestimation of their own incomes relative to the national average. Thus, prior literature suggests that Americans likely underestimate levels of economic school segregation, though whether they will likely respond to personalized information treatments by updating their policy preferences remains unknown.

Factors influencing the choice of segregated schools

Despite the large body of research on the measurement and consequences of school segregation, there is a dearth of contemporary research on *public opinion* surrounding policies to

reduce school segregation, particularly among parents. This is crucial because parental choices, preferences, and beliefs play a large role in structuring the economic makeup of children's schools (Billingham & Hunt, 2016). Parents select neighborhoods and schools for their children in part because of the socioeconomic characteristics and public goods associated with them (Goyette & Lareau, 2014; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). Families desire a "package deal" of neighborhoods with quality schools within their financial means (Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017). As a result, affluent families tend to avoid high poverty schools (Saporito, 2003) and will pay a premium for homes in neighborhoods where the schools have higher standardized test scores (Bayer, Ferreira, & McMillan, 2007). This leads to increased income school segregation, as schools with higher test scores are disproportionately in more affluent neighborhoods (Owens, 2018; Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). Moreover, affluent families in neighborhoods with higher levels of poverty tend to take advantage of school choice options or private schools rather than attend local public schools, resulting in more segregated schools than residential areas more generally (Owens, 2017; Pearman & Swain, 2017; Saporito, 2003; Saporito & Sohoni, 2007). This is true despite the fact that school district boundaries tend to be drawn such that they reflect the segregation of surrounding neighborhoods (Monarrez, 2020), though "gerrymandered" districts with irregularly-shaped attendance boundaries tend to be *less* segregating than districts where students attend their nearest local public schools (Monarrez, 2020; Saporito, 2017).

Of course, parents alone are not responsible for the existence of economic school segregation. Income and wealth determine neighborhoods where families can afford to buy or rent a home, and the unequal and uneven distribution of income and wealth has led to dramatic differences in the cost of living across neighborhoods (Chetty et al., 2020; Goyette & Lareau, 2014; Rhodes & Warkentien, 2017). As a result, rich and poor schoolchildren tend to live in very

different neighborhoods. About 70% of U.S. schoolchildren attend their zoned public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2019), meaning neighborhood segregation has a powerful effect on economic school segregation even beyond parental preferences for within-district sorting and attendance boundaries.

And yet, little is known about how parents think about economic school segregation. To address this gap in the literature, this study leverages an experiment designed to measure parental beliefs about the levels of school segregation in their local district as well as their preferences toward policies designed to reduce school segregation. If people are unaware of the extent to which schools are segregated – particularly in their own local contexts where they have power to invest in segregation-reducing policies either through direct action or local politics – providing them with accurate information could potentially change their personal and policy preferences. We test whether providing parents with information on the actual levels of school segregation in their district as well as research findings on the consequences of segregation affects their support of policies to reduce school segregation. Specifically, we investigate the following research questions. First, how does the receipt of information on the actual amount of local school segregation change support for segregation-reducing policies? Does this effect vary by whether the respondent over- or underestimated school segregation in their area? Second, how is parental support for school segregation-reducing policies associated with observed levels of local school segregation? Finally, are parents aware of the extent to which segregation exists in their local areas?

Data

Data for this study will be drawn from an original survey experiment to be implemented in Fall 2020. Our survey sample will be a sample of parents provided by Lucid, a survey company. This study has been approved by the Stanford University Institutional Review Board (IRB), pending final revisions associated with our most recent experimental protocol (see appendix).

Experimental Design

Parents in the survey sample are randomly assigned to either the treatment condition or control condition. In the treatment condition, parents receive information on the true amount of economic school segregation in their zip code as well as a research finding on the consequences associated with economic school segregation. In contrast, participants in the control condition are not given any additional information about their local school segregation. Both conditions answer identical segregation-related personal and policy preference questions.

We focus on economic disparities captured by *EdFacts* definitions of economic disadvantage, which are drawn from the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA). Following a short description of school segregation, we ask participants about their perception of the level of economic school segregation in their local district using intuitive images illustrating different amounts of school segregation. All respondents will complete questions designed to measure their perceptions of school segregation and preferences for policies that might reduce school segregation in their district. It should be noted that our goal in this experiment is to provide accurate and understandable information to respondents, who are likely not well-versed in the many ways to measure and conceptualize school segregation. Thus, consistent with previous studies using information treatments to measure changes in beliefs and preferences (Cruces et al.,

2013; Kuziemko et al., 2015), we use a relatively simple and straightforward display of segregation rather than a more nuanced or technical illustration.

Implications

Our study sheds light on both parental conceptions regarding levels of school segregation in their area and on how preferences for school segregation-reducing policies shift as a result of informational stimuli on the actual levels and consequences of school segregation. In doing so, this work contributes to existing bodies of research in education policy, sociology, and economics, among others. First, we contribute to the large body of literature on how attitudes and perceptions of race or social class produce unequal social and economic outcomes (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Bobo, Charles, Krysan, & Simmons, 2012; Gaddis, 2015; Krysan, Couper, Farley, & Forman, 2009). Second, we build on the budding experimental literature on elasticity of policy preferences to information (Alesina, Stantcheva, & Teso, 2018; Cruces et al., 2013; Kuziemko et al., 2015). Finally, by focusing on parental opinions of school segregation, we contribute to literature on the causes of school segregation (Billingham & Hunt, 2016; Jacobs, 2011; Saporito, 2017). To our knowledge, no previous contemporary studies have collected data on perceptions of local levels of economic school segregation.

In addition, our results will be useful to policymakers and educational administrators interested in better understanding parental beliefs and preferences towards school segregation. Imagine, for example, our results indicate that parents have an inaccurate perception of the amount school segregation that exists in their district and that parental support for school segregation-reducing policies is responsive to learning new information. Then, policymakers

interested in garnering parental support for school segregation-reducing policies might benefit from informational campaigns that make segregation levels more visible and interpretable to parent stakeholders. Even if our results show parents often do not respond to information, understanding the conditions under which preferences regarding school segregation-reducing policies are relatively inelastic is useful to policymakers (who often are choosing to invest effort and attention in many competing prospective policies). Because our study includes conditions for economic school segregation at varying amounts, policymakers in contexts with low or high levels of economic school segregation will be able to use the data most relevant to them.

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