

Opinion | Dealing With Our Segregated, Jim Crow Education System

Nicholas Kristof – *The New York Times*, May 21, 2021

We in the commentariat have leapt at covering police violence against Black citizens since George Floyd's murder a year ago, but I don't think we've been as good at responding to other inequities that cost a far greater number of lives.

Even if Floyd hadn't been murdered, he still very likely would have died prematurely because of his race.

There would have been no headlines, no protests, no speeches. But the average Black man in America lives [about five fewer years](#) than the average white man. A newborn Black boy [in Washington, D.C.](#), has a shorter life expectancy than a newborn boy [in India](#).

One of the challenges for those of us in journalism is to do a better job highlighting these inequities that don't come with a viral video.

Since Floyd's death, we've focused on racial inequities in the criminal justice system, and it has been easy for liberal white Americans — my tribe — to feel indignant and righteous while blaming others. But in some areas, such as an unjust education system, we are part of the problem.

At the very time that America was having a racial reckoning about criminal justice, Democratic states were closing in-person schooling in ways that particularly harmed nonwhite students. Race gaps increased, according to [research](#) by McKinsey & Company, and [a Federal Reserve study](#) suggests that higher dropout rates for marginalized students will have long-term consequences.

More broadly, we in the United States embrace a public education system based on local financing that ensures that poor kids go to poor schools and rich kids to rich schools.

Yes, it's a "public" school system with "free" education. So anyone who can afford a typical home in Palo Alto, Calif., costing [\\$3.2 million](#), can then send children to superb schools. And less than 2 percent of Palo Alto's population is Black.

Opinion One year since George Floyd's death: What has changed and what comes next?

- William Barber II and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove believe that "[the Trayvon Martin generation has come of age](#) and is pushing the nation toward a Third Reconstruction."
- Hakeem Jefferson and Jennifer Chudy, two political scientists, look at the charts that answer the questions: "Did George Floyd's death catalyze [support for Black Lives Matter](#)? If so, for how long and for whom?"
- Elizabeth Hinton, a historian, writes that "the history of Black rebellion demonstrates a fundamental reality: [Police violence precipitates community violence](#)."
- Levar Stoney, the mayor of Richmond, Va., reflects on [taking down the Confederate monuments](#) that "cast a long, dark shadow over our city."

- Talmon Smith, a Times Opinion editor, writes that [the past year's racial reckoning](#) was “disproportionately experienced by privileged Americans.”
- David W. McIvor, a political theorist, recalls the “wild swings between hope and anguish, possibility and anxiety” [of last summer's protests](#).
- Six [young Americans reflect](#) on how the past year has changed them: “I’ve been a lot louder these days.”
- 14 [conservative voters discuss their feelings](#) on race, politics and why “we are so divided right now.”

Rucker Johnson, a professor of public policy at the University of California, Berkeley, has found that since 1988, American public schools have become more racially segregated. Roughly [15 percent](#) of Black and Hispanic students attend so-called [apartheid schools](#) with fewer than 1 percent white students.

In 1973, the Supreme Court came a whisker from overturning this system of unequal school funding, in the case of Rodriguez v. San Antonio Independent School District. Lower courts had ruled that profoundly unequal school funding violated the Constitution, but by a 5-to-4 vote the justices disagreed.

This was the Brown v. Board of Education case that went the other way. If a single justice had switched, America would today be a fairer and more equitable nation.

Educated white Americans are now repulsed at the thought of systems of separate and unequal drinking fountains for Black Americans but seem comfortable with a Jim Crow financing system resulting in unequal schools for Black children — even though schools are far more consequential than water fountains.

Perhaps that’s because we and our children have a stake in this unequal system. Similarly, we accept that elite universities offer legacy preferences that amount to affirmative action for highly privileged children, with bonus consideration for big donors. This is one reason some universities have more students [from the richest 1 percent](#) than from the poorest 60 percent.

Likewise, wealthy white Americans benefit from single-family zoning laws in the suburbs around those fine “public” schools. The effect of this zoning is to freeze out low-income families and keep neighborhoods more segregated.

Then there’s our skewed tax system: The I.R.S. is more likely to audit impoverished Americans who use the earned-income tax credit and typically earn less than \$20,000 than it is to audit people earning \$400,000. The county in the United States with the highest audit rate, [according to ProPublica](#), is Humphreys County, Miss., which is impoverished and [three-quarters Black](#).

So how do we address these root inequities?

We don’t have perfect solutions, but many programs promote opportunity and reduce race gaps over time. The time to start is early childhood, with home visiting, quality child care and pre-K. Baby bonds can reduce wealth gaps, and child tax credits cut child poverty. Job training and a higher minimum

wage can help families. Many of these elements are in President Biden's [three-part proposal](#) to invest in America and Americans, [with the goal](#) of reducing child poverty in America by half.

One paradox is that while liberals often advocate such measures as ways to reduce racial inequality, polling suggests that this framing actually [reduces public support](#). The best way to win support for these progressive policies, research suggests, is to frame them as reducing class gaps, not race gaps.

Back in the early 2000s, white Americans sometimes [said](#) in polls that antiwhite bias was a bigger problem than anti-Black bias. That was delusional, and the tumult following the Floyd case [increased](#) the share of whites who acknowledge that discrimination persists.

So the Floyd case may represent a milestone of progress in criminal justice. Now can America leverage this recognition of unfairness and inequity into other spheres, such as our still segregated education system?

Nicholas Kristof's Newsletter: Get a behind-the-scenes look at Nick's gritty journalism as he travels around the United States and the world.

The Times is committed to publishing [a diversity of letters](#) to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some [tips](#). And here's our email: letters@nytimes.com.