



# Challenging Group-based Segregation and Isolation: Whether and Why

## Citation

Hochschild, Jennifer and Shanna Weitz. 2017. Challenging Group-based Segregation and Isolation: Whether and Why. In Proceedings of A Shared Future: Fostering Communities of Inclusion in an Era of Inequality, Cambridge, MA.

## Published Version

<https://www.jchs.harvard.edu//research-areas/working-papers/shared-future-challenging-group-based-segregation-and-isolation>

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**Challenging Group-based Segregation and Isolation:  
Whether and Why**

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5/22/17 v2

8/28/17 jlh copyedit

Liberal<sup>1</sup> polities are as committed to ending segregation and isolation in principle as they are engaged in maintaining them in practice. That contradiction is partly explained by the perennial gap between ideals and practices; this symposium focuses on strategies for closing that gap. But the contradiction between ideal and practice also rests on a deeper base. Understood through a particular lens, liberal ideals permit, and in some circumstances encourage, group isolation and separation. Some public policies reflect that understanding of liberalism, and need to be taken into account as we seek to end impermissible segregation and isolation.

Another contradiction complicates the first. Segregation among racial or ethnic groups is, overall, declining in the United States from a high starting point; segregation among economic classes is rising from a low starting point. Policymakers and analysts can turn to well-established norms, laws, practices, and advocacy organizations in seeking to lessen racial and ethnic isolation. But the United States lacks a parallel set of norms, laws, practices, and advocates for lessening class isolation—in fact, the societal infrastructure does more to reinforce than to eliminate it. From the vantage point of liberal ideals, should we consider group and class segregation independently from one another? If so, how do we evaluate their frequent intersection, even as one is rising and the other declining?

Without resolving them, this paper explores these two fundamental contradictions, between ideals and practice and between race and class, in light of liberal norms. That is, the rest of this symposium focuses on *how* Americans can effectively intervene to reduce the disadvantages of isolated or segregated communities; here we explore *whether* and *why* to do so.

### **Patterns of Racial, Class, and Religious Separation**

We begin by documenting changing patterns of racial/ethnic and class segregation in American cities. The former was ubiquitous and deep for most of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> By most

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1. “Liberal” refers to the ideology that calls on governments both to foster individual rights and dignity and also to promote equality of opportunity through active intervention in political, economic, or social realms.

2. Massey and Denton (1993); Iceland (2009); Frey (2010).

measures, it is now declining.<sup>3</sup> The latter, however, is increasing<sup>4</sup>; the combination is creating a new spatial dynamic in much of America.

We measure racial or ethnic segregation through the Dissimilarity Index (DI) measures provided by Brown University's American Communities Project for census years 1980 through 2010. We calculate it for 2015 with the 2011-2015 American Community Survey (ACS). The DI ranges from 0 to 100, with 0 representing no segregation and 100 representing perfect segregation between two racial or ethnic groups. The DI uses census tracts to measure the segregation level between groups within a given geographic location; here we analyze non-Hispanic Whites, non-Hispanic Blacks, and Hispanics of any race. We have complete DI measures for 1,498 cities and towns<sup>5</sup> for 1980 through 2015.

We measure income segregation in American cities via the rank-order information theory index.<sup>6</sup> Using census reports of income distribution, this measure ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 represents perfect integration and 1 represents perfect segregation. We use family (rather than individual) income due to its availability over time. We have complete income segregation measures for 3,055 cities and towns for the census years 1980, 1990, and 2000, and for 2010 and 2015 from the 2006-2010 and 2011-2015 ACS's, respectively. (For many of these locations we also have racial segregation measures, as described above.)

Racial or ethnic and economic segregation have, of course, been intertwined throughout American history. Among the 284 cities with 2015 populations of 100,000 or greater for which we have complete data, the correlation between White-Black and economic segregation was 0.31 in 1980 (0.34 for the South), and 0.24 (0.32 for the South) in 2015. In addition to region, the proportion of Black residents matters to the amount of overlap between race and class in a given location. Among cities with more than 100,000 people in 1980, we identified 151 with

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3. Glaeser and Vigdor (2012); Frey (2014); Hochschild (2012). But see also Alba and Romalewski (2012); Crowder, Pais, and South (2012).

4. Bischoff and Reardon (2014); Massey, Rothwell, and Domina (2009); Fry and Taylor (2012).

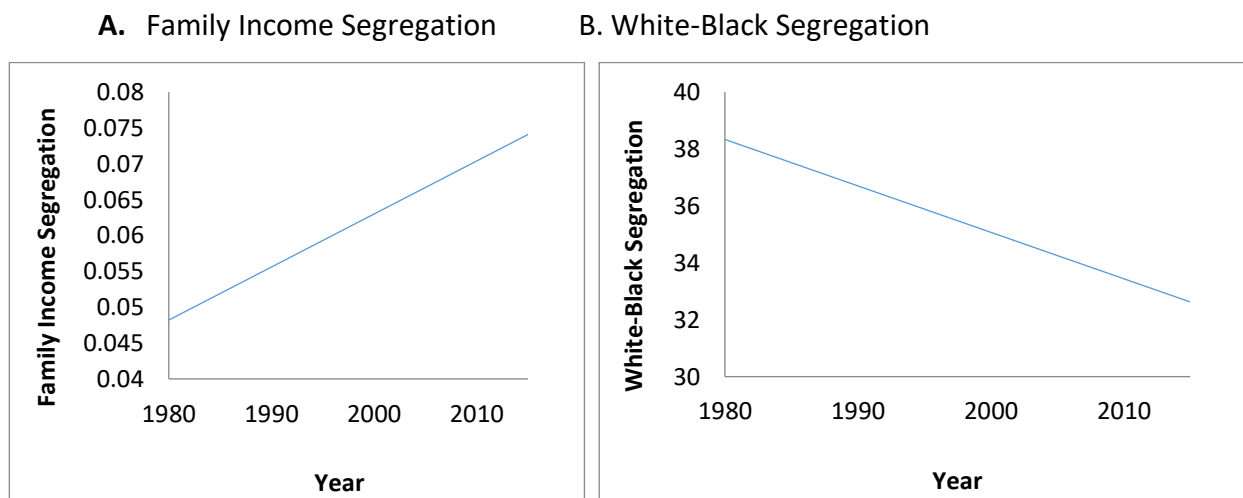
5. We measure segregation in cities and towns, rather than across metropolitan areas, to enable one to connect trends in segregation to the characteristics of particular local governments. In general, trends at the city and town level resemble trends measured at the metropolitan level.

6. From Bischoff and Reardon (2014). Like them, we use the Geolytics Neighborhood Change Database (NCDB) as the source of family income data, in order to keep the geography of census tracts constant over time.

more than 10 percent Black residents, and 133 with fewer than 10 percent. The correlation between income segregation and racial segregation was 0.33 in the former, and only 0.20 in the latter. The difference in this association was even greater in 2015—0.30 for the cities with many Black residents and 0.06 for cities with few.

As the declining correlations from 1980 to 2015 indicate, group and class segregation are slowly diverging. Of the 1,542 cities with relevant data, 46 percent experienced *increasing* economic segregation and *decreasing* White-Black segregation between 1980 and 2015.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 shows these trends clearly:

Figure 1: Family income segregation rose, and White-Black segregation declined, in U.S. cities, 1980 – 2015\*



Source: Authors’ analyses; see text for data sources. These are fitted values; note that scales on the Y-axes differ.

However, just as the association between economic and racial segregation varies across place and time, so do the trends shown in Figure 1. White-Black segregation has declined the most over the past 35 years in absolute terms; Black-Hispanic segregation decreased by just 2 points, while White-Hispanic segregation increased by over 7 points.<sup>8</sup> As a result, 40 percent of the 1,498 cities with data on Latinos in 1980 have seen a simultaneous rise in economic

7. Conversely, only 470 (15 percent) of the 3,055 cities for which we have relevant data saw a decline in income segregation from 1980 to 2015.

8. That rise is largely explained by demographic change. The share of Latinos in the American population rose from about 6.5 percent in 1980 to almost 18 percent in 2015—a three-fold increase. For most of that period, migrants moved to a few “gateway” cities and states (Singer 2006), making ethnic segregation very hard to avoid.

segregation and decline in Black-Hispanic segregation since 1980; the corresponding figure is only 19 percent for White-Hispanic segregation.

Large cities were more likely than smaller ones to experience the trends shown in Figure 1. Fully 94 percent of cities with 2015 populations over 500,000 experienced growing divergence between racial and class segregation over the thirty-five year span, compared with only 44 percent of cities with populations under 100,000.

Finally, the trends shown in Figure 1 differ geographically. Economic segregation has risen similarly across all four regions since 1980, while White-Black segregation rose slightly in the West but nowhere else, White-Hispanic segregation rose slightly in the South and substantially in the Midwest, and Black-Hispanic segregation rose in the West.

The growth of economic segregation has been exacerbated by a simultaneous increase in income inequality within as well as across racial or ethnic groups. The Gini index<sup>9</sup> for the whole American population rose from 0.4 in 1972 to 0.46 in 2015; it also rose within each racial or ethnic group. As in the United States as a whole, in our sample of 326 cities,<sup>10</sup> urban African Americans have higher levels of internal income segregation in 2015 than do Whites or Latinos; Latinos are close behind. From its high starting point, intra-Black income segregation also increased the most over this period. These 326 cities represent 26 percent of the total US population in 2015; intra-Black income segregation increased in them by 53 percent, intra-White income segregation by 23 percent, and intra-Hispanic income segregation by 30 percent.

Segregation and isolation persist, in short, but the kind of separation is changing and it differs across space and group. Racial or ethnic segregation remains high but is declining especially between Whites and Blacks; class segregation is growing in general and within racial or ethnic groups. American cities, whose politics have been oriented along a racial/ethnic axis

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<sup>9</sup> The Gini index measures economic inequality within a population. It ranges from 0 to 1, with 0 representing perfect income equality across all individuals and 1 representing complete inequality (for example, one person has all of the income and the others have none).

<sup>10</sup> The sample of cities in this analysis is much smaller than in the previous analyses, since we use only cities with at least 1,000 families of a given racial or ethnic group. In addition, due to data limitations we also restrict this analysis to the years 2000 and 2015. This constraint allows for a more reliable measure of group income segregation than if we used all cities, but also greatly limits the analysis. Our sample includes 326 cities with complete data from 2000 and 2015 for all racial and ethnic groups.

for a century, are confronting a new situation of increasingly affluent and increasingly poor neighborhoods; racial isolation is no longer the only axis of isolation with which to contend.

### **The Many Costs and Occasional Benefits of Group Separation**

Both racial/ethnic and economic segregation have many well-documented harms, particularly for disadvantaged groups and the poor. Given the excellent and detailed reviews in the Joint Center's framing paper and McArdle and Acevedo-Garcia's paper in this symposium, we need do no more than stipulate their findings. Nonetheless, as political scientists, we cannot resist adding a few comments on the political costs of group isolation.

Although concerted political effort might be able to change entrenched structural disadvantages, low-income communities have little political power. Black residents in poor neighborhoods participate in politics at lower rates than do Black residents of less poor neighborhoods.<sup>11</sup> The poor vote at lower rates, are less likely to attend community meetings, and participate less in civic or church organizations, which can be springboards for political participation.<sup>12</sup>

Lack of political participation in poor communities has a range of causes, from mistrust of elites, authorities, and fellow residents<sup>13</sup>; to a high proportion of non-citizens or disfranchised ex-felons<sup>14</sup>; to the failure of political parties and candidates to engage in outreach and mobilization.<sup>15</sup> Compared with better-off neighborhoods, poor communities are subject to higher rates of crime, more intense police oversight, and concentrations of residents involved in the criminal justice system—all of which further erode civic ties and trust in one another and political institutions, not to speak of physical access to meetings and voting booths.<sup>16</sup> Thus the public benefits of social bonds among neighbors who trust one another, and the consequent

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<sup>11</sup> Alex-Assensoh (1997); Cohen and Dawson (1993); Widestrom (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Cohen and Dawson (1993); Verba, Brady, and Schlozman (1995).

<sup>13</sup> Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls (1999); Goffman (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Burch (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Gest (2016); Widestrom (2015).

<sup>16</sup> Burch (2013); Lerman and Weaver (2014); Shihadeh and Flynn (1996).

“shared willingness to intervene for the public good” through community mobilization and political participation,<sup>17</sup> is hard to come by.<sup>18</sup>

To our knowledge, no public actor in the United States any longer endorses *de jure* racial or ethnic segregation of neighborhoods, schools, jobs, or any other public association. Similarly, whereas 40 percent of Americans agreed strongly or slightly in 1972 that “white people have a right to keep Negroes out of their neighborhoods if they want to, and Negroes should respect that right,” by 1996, only 12 percent did so (most respondents disagreed “strongly”).<sup>19</sup> Mandatory segregation so obviously violates laws and liberal norms, and causes such harm to individuals, communities, and the society at large, that we need not rehearse why most Americans (at least in public) and all laws reject it. However, this judgment rests on the term “mandatory”—voluntary group separation is more complicated. Americans sometimes endorse group members’ choice to live among people like themselves, and voluntary isolation can benefit as well as harm. Put more formally, in addition to its many harmful effects, group or class isolation may have some positive externalities.

For example, a robust scholarly literature explores the benefits of ethnic enclaves for immigrants and their descendants. Communities with high proportions of co-national migrants offer connections to housing, employment, and legal services, as well as valued cultural practices, normative interactions, and family dynamics.<sup>20</sup> Religious organizations in immigrant enclaves help newcomers find employment and gain higher wages.<sup>21</sup> As one authoritative review puts it, “the enclave is more than just a shelter for the disadvantaged who are forced to take on either self-employment or marginal work in small businesses. Rather, the ethnic enclave possesses the potential to develop a distinct structure of economic opportunities as an

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<sup>17</sup> Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002), 457; Putnam (2000).

<sup>18</sup> Research on isolated, low-income Whites is mostly recent and is much less well developed than parallel research on non-Whites. However, a dismal portrayal of economically depressed and geographically isolated White communities is emerging. Case and Deaton (2017); Chetty et al. (2014).

<sup>19</sup> General Social Survey (GSS). The question referred to Blacks in 1996. 1972 was the first year for the GSS, and 1996 was the last year in which it included this item.

<sup>20</sup> Logan, Zhang, and Alba (2002); Massey (1985).

<sup>21</sup> Connor (2011).



effective alternative path to social mobility.”<sup>22</sup> Even when children of low-status immigrants are upwardly mobile, marry outside their group, and move away from ethnic enclaves,<sup>23</sup> they value persistent ties with concentrated communities of co-ethnics.<sup>24</sup> So one cannot assume that group separation is always coerced or that its costs always outweigh its benefits to members of the group.

A parallel literature endorses self-chosen isolation among African Americans. Analysts and activists have insisted for decades that racial solidarity and even group separation are necessary to advance economically, enhance political power, reinforce cultural values, and enjoy social interactions.<sup>25</sup> The philosopher Tommie Shelby, for example, denies that justice always requires racial residential integration: “some blacks avoid residing in white neighborhoods to limit unpleasant experiences with whites ... [or] to avoid interracial conflict.... There is also ... the positive preference for a black neighborhood.... Black self-segregation is still a choice.... [T]he problem is not closing ranks per se.”<sup>26</sup>

Ordinary Americans sometimes concur. In 1982 (the only year that GSS asked this question), a third of black respondents wanted to live in an all or mostly black neighborhood (N=172); 15 percent made a similar choice in June 1995, according to an NBC News poll. A fifth of Hispanics preferred a “mostly Hispanic” neighborhood in a 2003 survey.<sup>27</sup> In a survey that one of us conducted in 2014, more than half of the respondents preferred to be among many members of their own group rather than in more integrated environments if they could be assured of equally good schools, equally high salaries, or equally responsive political representatives.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Zhou (2004), 224.

<sup>23</sup> Kasinitz et al. (2008).

<sup>24</sup> Logan, Zhang, and Alba (2002).

<sup>25</sup> Dawson (2001); Washington (1901).

<sup>26</sup> Shelby (2016), 59.

<sup>27</sup> Hispanic N=551. About 15 percent of non-Hispanic blacks (N=446) chose “mostly black” for the corresponding question asked of them (Civil Rights and Race Relations Survey 2004, Nov. 2003). See also Gallup Organization, *Race Relations Poll*, Jan. 4-Feb. 28, 1997.

<sup>28</sup> A majority of White and Latino respondents preferred the own-group option in all three conditions (school, job, political representation). A majority of Black respondents chose the own-group option only for schools. Hochschild and Weaver (2016).

Even the isolated poor can benefit in some ways from remaining in their neighborhood. Moving to a less poor neighborhood risks the loss of social connections, with their associated emotional and material benefits. Residents of a mixed-income Hope VI community in Seattle, for example, lack common experiences and physical proximity to other residents, so they find social interaction difficult.<sup>29</sup> Poor families who have moved to dispersed public housing in mixed-income neighborhoods use neighborhood ties in job searches less frequently than do residents of clustered public housing.<sup>30</sup> Further, moving from public housing to integrated neighborhoods decreases voter turnout, probably due to a loss of social ties.<sup>31</sup> A significant body of work documents the difficulties poor residents have in building interpersonal networks when moving from low- to mixed-income neighborhoods.<sup>32</sup>

Like scholars, activists, and members of the public, laws and judicial decisions sometimes endorse certain forms of or reasons for group separation. Again, the distinction between mandatory and voluntary is crucial here. Exclusionary racial zoning was ruled unconstitutional in 1917,<sup>33</sup> and the ruling was reinforced in 1948.<sup>34</sup> The 1968 Fair Housing Act prohibited housing discrimination, and it was strengthened in a “momentous” though little-noticed Supreme Court decision in 2015.<sup>35</sup> However, zoning laws and ordinances, gated communities, and condo associations continue to sustain some forms of separation and isolation.

Zoning laws are not facially discriminatory; their purpose is “to divide a municipality into residential, commercial, and industrial districts (or zones) ... with the use of property within each district being reasonably uniform.”<sup>36</sup> But given “additional restrictions that can be quite detailed,”<sup>37</sup> zoning laws can and easily do separate people by class.<sup>38</sup> The Wharton Residential

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<sup>29</sup> Kleit (2005).

<sup>30</sup> Kleit (2001).

<sup>31</sup> Gay (2012).

<sup>32</sup> Clampet-Lundquist (2004); Clampet-Lundquist (2010); Curley (2009); Popkin (2008).

<sup>33</sup> *Buchanan v. Warley*, 245 U.S. 60.

<sup>34</sup> *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1.

<sup>35</sup> *TDHCA v. ICP*, 576 U.S.; Rothstein (2015).

<sup>36</sup> FindLaw.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Rothwell and Massey (2010).

Land Use Regulation Index (WRLURI) shows that across the United States, “community wealth is strongly positively correlated with the degree of local land use regulation. ... Researchers and policy-makers should seriously consider exclusionary desires as a motivation in many instances.”<sup>39</sup> With most Americans supporting zoning laws,<sup>40</sup> class segregation remains difficult to address without infringing on individual choice.

Americans are even more likely to accept, or endorse, religious groups’ desire to live separately from other Americans. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder*<sup>41</sup> the Supreme Court held that Amish families could ignore a state’s compulsory schooling law after the eighth grade precisely because they lived in an isolated, self-segregated community: “This concept of life aloof from the world and its values is central to their faith. ... [T]he Amish have demonstrated the . . . interrelationship of belief with their mode of life ... and the hazards presented by the State's enforcement of a statute generally valid as to others.” The Court did not claim that the Amish are unique. And in fact, state and local governments have accommodated Jewish communities through charter schools “with a mission to teach Hebrew,”<sup>42</sup> and other communities through Afrocentric<sup>43</sup> and creationist<sup>44</sup> schools.

These cases are rare, and far from the core concerns of this symposium. But they underline the fact that group isolation may not always be wrong; one must specify criteria for whether and why it is appropriate to “propose strategies for reducing the extent of residential segregation and/or mitigating its consequences.” We turn now to that question.

### **Whether and Why to Reduce Residential Segregation**

The difficulty here is that liberal norms mandate several, perhaps contradictory, responses to group-based segregation and isolation, depending on how one understands liberal norms, groups and class, and segregation. So even if liberalism—rather than democracy, liberty, community, faith, or some other powerful set of norms—ought to determine the polity’s response to isolation and segregation, there is no clear path forward. Instead, there are several.

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<sup>39</sup> Gyourko, Saiz, and Summers (2008), 695, 710.

<sup>40</sup> Leiserowitz et al. (2011).

<sup>41</sup> 406 U.S. 205, 1972.

<sup>42</sup> Heilman (2013).

<sup>43</sup> Binder (2002); Teasley et al. (2016).

<sup>44</sup> Branch (2016).

Tommy Shelby articulates the liberal response to segregation that mostly drives this symposium's goal of promoting more inclusive communities. In his terms, the commitment to abolish poor black ghettos (which is not the same as ending black communities) is not merely a matter of overcoming prejudice or poverty. Rather, it is "an aggressive attempt at fundamental reform of the basic structure of our society." Ghetto abolitionism attacks racism and class-based stratification in the name of "equal and extensive liberty for all, from freedom of expression and association to the right to an unconditional social minimum and to participate as equals in collective self-governance."<sup>45</sup> Constitutional rights, democratic governance, equal opportunity, liberty—all are fostered by policies to overcome isolation and unchosen segregation among subordinated groups.

Justice William O. Douglas's partial dissent from the *Yoder* decision articulates another liberal view, compatible with Shelby's but with a different emphasis. He focuses on children's right to escape isolation through school and other non-group interactions in order to be able to choose their own future: "It is the student's judgment, not his parents', that is essential if we are to give full meaning to what we have said about the Bill of Rights and of the right of students to be masters of their own destiny." A generalized version of Douglas's focus on the Amish case is the classic liberal claim that a decent polity owes children the resources, skills, and opportunities to choose their futures. Children have a much more difficult time attaining those resources, skills, and opportunities in isolated, segregated, poor communities than in broadly inclusive and diverse communities.

Another way of looking at liberal norms, however, loosens the links between them and the urgency of abolishing isolated, segregated communities. There are two sub-arguments here. The first we have already discussed: liberalism might entail that minority communities have the right of self-determination. If African Americans, Latinos, recent immigrants, the Amish, Muslims, and so on find value in living with people like themselves, even at the cost of greater poverty and isolation than might otherwise be the case, a liberal might argue that group members should have the right to make that choice. The second sub-argument is, for us at any rate, more difficult: do the wealthy, or non-Hispanic whites, racists, or xenophobes have the

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<sup>45</sup> Shelby (2016), 275, 278.

same liberal right to choose to live among people like themselves so long as others are not legally excluded? Gated communities and zoning laws imply that Americans' answer is "yes." So, is isolation and separation of Whites or the well-off unjust, and to be fought by public policies?<sup>46</sup> By one understanding of liberal norms, the answer must be "no."

Someone espousing liberal norms as the touchstone for public policies must also consider three final complexities. First, what would people choose if they had experienced and understood the implications of *both* voluntary group separation *and* extensive integration and inclusion? That is, how can a polity enable people to determine what is in their own best interests and accords with their deepest values, given that they are necessarily choosing from within a partial, one-sided vantage point? One answer focuses on schooling, roughly in accord with Douglas's partial dissent in *Yoder*: regardless of where and how they live, the state should ensure that children receive an education that allows them to learn about and experience diversity of classmates, ideas, forms of knowledge, and adult role models so that they have more material from which to choose the type of community they want to live in as adults. This argument holds equally for disadvantaged minorities, religiously-based groups, and affluent or dominant groups. We share that view—but it does violate many people's religious, ethnic, or cultural commitments. The point of the *Yoder* plaintiffs was precisely that they did not want their children to experience other ways of life, and then choose between them and the Amish "mode of life."

Second, do race or ethnicity and class present the same sort of criteria for intervention on the grounds of liberal principles? As we noted above, the United States has a robust set of norms and institutions designed to reduce racial/ethnic separation, but it has no such norms and institutions designed to reduce class separation—in fact, the reverse is true. Zoning laws, geographically districted schools, many legislative districts, 401Ks, and mortgage subsidies in tax law all have the effect, if not the intent, of reinforcing class separation. But liberal activists challenge them much less frequently than they challenge racially discriminatory practices. Given that class separation is rapidly increasing, while group separation is moderating or even

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<sup>46</sup> Nancy Rosenblum (2000) offers the best analysis of how hard a liberal polity should strive to promote liberal norms within voluntary groups or associations. Her answer is, roughly, "not very hard"; freedom of association is a normative and constitutional right, as well as an essential element of civil society.

slowly declining, the Joint Center's attention to segregation and isolation may reveal a deep contradiction within liberal individualist norms.

Finally, what is the most important public interest in this arena? Perhaps, even if minority groups choose separation, the powerful research evidence showing inequality and failure in outcomes such as education, health, political impact, and economic mobility for the isolated poor requires that policymakers pursue integration in order for the United States as a whole to move forward. But is the public interest best served by promoting policies that run counter to the expressed interests and lived choices of many Americans? In particular, if desegregation requires, as it often does, that the disadvantaged group bear much of the burden of incorporation and diversity,<sup>47</sup> how should we decide what is in the public interest?

We are left with the contradiction with which this paper started. Liberal polities are and should be committed to policies that eliminate isolation and segregation of identifiable groups—except when they should not. Though this contradiction probably cannot be resolved, it can be eased. On the one hand, as Shelby suggests, public policy should increase investment in low-income communities so that poor people of any race or ethnicity have genuine options about whether to move or stay in pursuit of opportunities. Such investment could include protection of affordable housing and local institutions in gentrifying neighborhoods as well as construction of more housing and important amenities for low- and middle-income urban residents. It could also include public sector jobs, subsidies for private sector jobs, robust community colleges and job training facilities, and child support. On the other hand, as Justice Douglas suggests, public schools should be provided with the resources and structures to be able to introduce children to a variety of potential future selves. That could imply desegregation by class as well as by race, a range of types of classrooms or schools with distinctive profiles so students can try out different contexts, incentives to lure suburban children into urban schools and vice versa, and a more robust and explicit commitment to treating public schooling as a public good.<sup>48</sup> Perhaps Americans should directly challenge zoning laws, or pass laws that encourage density and discourage suburban sprawl, or otherwise use choice architecture to

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<sup>47</sup> Shelby (2016); Bell (1976).

<sup>48</sup> Hochschild and Scovronick (2004).

promote one type of liberalism without violating the rights and commitments implied by the other type.<sup>49</sup> Liberal polities have never sorted out the tension between individual rights and group autonomy and probably never will—but that is no excuse for failing to take the steps toward freedom of choice and exciting opportunities to flourish that any liberal should embrace.

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<sup>49</sup> Thaler and Sunstein (2009).

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