

School Assignment Policy and Racial Segregation: A Review

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Disclaimer: The views presented are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia or the Federal Reserve Board.

Racial Segregation in US Schools and the Role of Policy

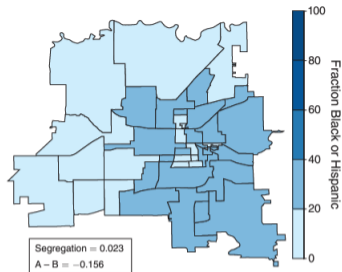
- Racial segregation is enduring, pervasive in the US
 - Desegregation efforts during the 1960s 70s reduced racial inequities (Reber 2005, Lutz 2011, Billings et al. 2014, Johnson 2019)
 - Progress in school desegregation since the *Brown* decision slowed to a stop (Clotfelter 2004, reardon et al. 2012, reardon & Owens 2014, Owens et al. 2016)
 - As of 2020 census, neighborhood segregation still a massive problem in many cities (Monarrez and Schonholzer 2023)
- Policy tools available to redress harm of segregation in public schools
 - **Local school districts** (school assignment policy, school grade structures, transportation policy)
 - State education agencies (school funding formulas, regulation of district creation, judicial oversight)
 - Federal (Dept of Ed Title-I funding, judicial oversight)

Current State of School Attendance Boundaries (SABs)

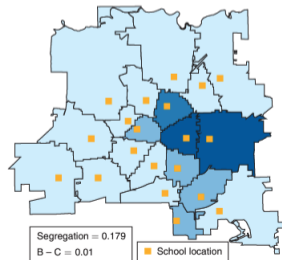
- School board discussions on SABs frequently focus on diversity of student bodies and other competing objectives
- Most districts prioritize commuting distance in SABs, replicating patterns of neighborhood segregation in public schools (Siegel-Hawley 2013, Richards 2014, Saporito 2017)
- Some districts have racially integrated SABs, almost none are more segregated than their neighborhoods (Taylor & Frankenberg 2021, Monarrez 2022)

- Ex: Springfield IL, SY 2013-14
 - Residentially segregated
 - Complex SAB map achieves integrated school system
 - Longer commutes than otherwise
- Districts with desegregated boundaries tend to:
 - Be less racially intolerant
 - (or) be under a court desegregation order
 - They also have longer commutes (specially for households of color)

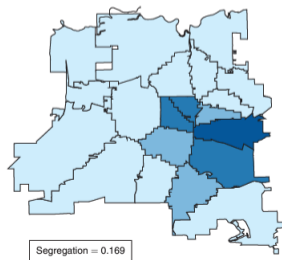
Panel A. Actual 2013–2014 school attendance boundaries



Panel B. Minimum distance boundaries (specific to school siting)



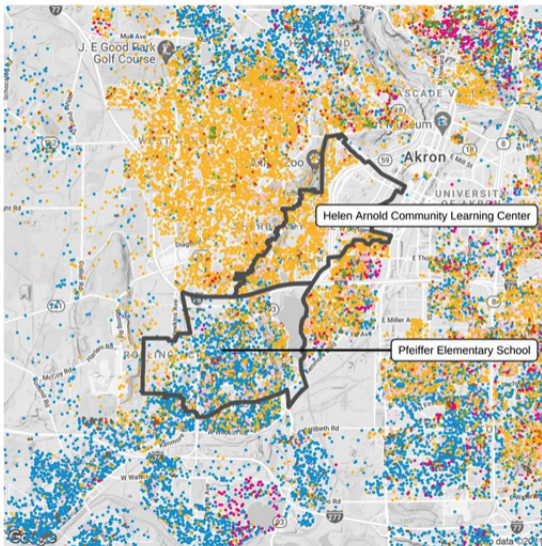
Panel C. Simulated boundaries (random school sites)



Current State of School Attendance Boundaries (SABs)

- Simulation exercises show that, in many districts, SABs could be more racially integrated without increasing commuting costs (Gillani et al. 2023)
- Plethora of cases where reorienting a single boundary line could make a huge difference in racial separation
 - Both for attendance boundaries within school districts (Monarrez and Chien 2021)
 - And for jurisdictional boundaries across districts (Monarrez and Schonholzer 2023)
- From a perspective of the trade-off between commuting distance and segregation, many districts are "inefficient"

- Elementary school boundaries in Akron OH
 - SAB line delimiting attendance rights between Helen Arnold and Pfeiffer elementary schools
- Considerations
 - SAB line coincides with a highway



Race or ethnicity

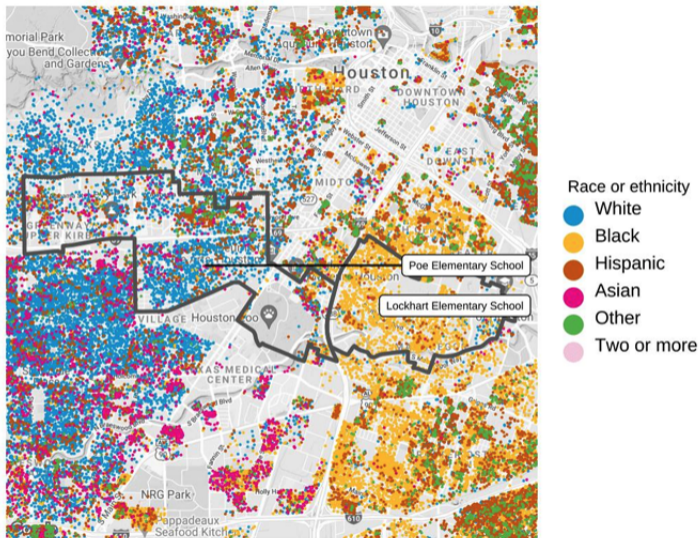
- White
- Black
- Hispanic
- Asian
- Other
- Two or more

Sources: US Census Bureau and Precisely.

Notes: One dot corresponds to one person. Demographic data are based on 2010 census block data.

Poe Elementary School and Lockhart Elementary School

- Elementary school boundaries in Houston TX
 - SAB line divides attendance rights for Poe and Lockhart elementary schools
- Considerations
 - Close by but in different "neighborhoods"

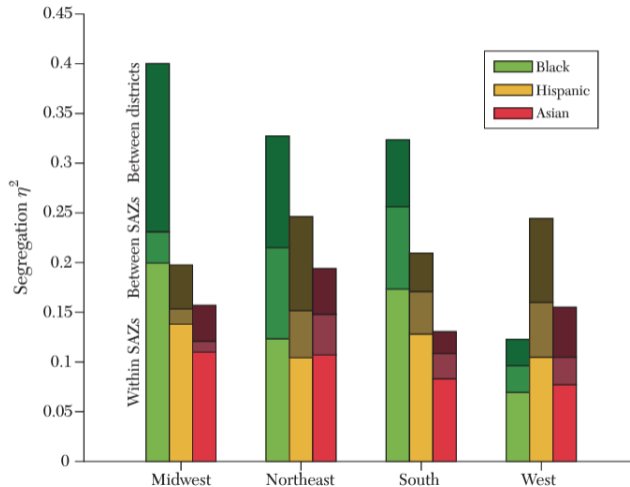


Sources: US Census Bureau and Precisely.

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Jurisdictional boundaries

- Local school districts have direct power to change composition of schools within their jurisdiction
- Little remedy for inequities **between** jurisdictions
- Metropolitan segregation is driven primarily by jurisdictional divisions
- District secession (creation) may exacerbate inequities



Jurisdictional boundaries

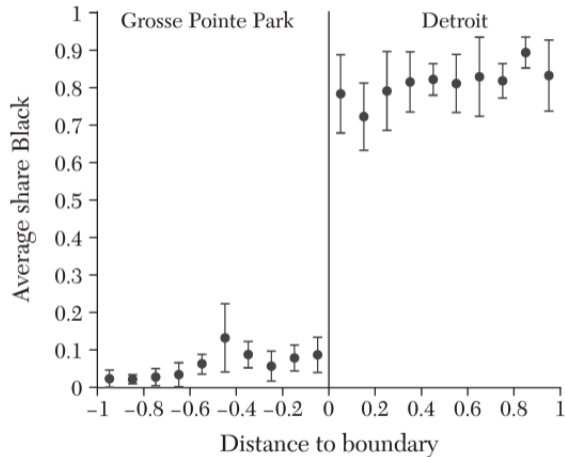
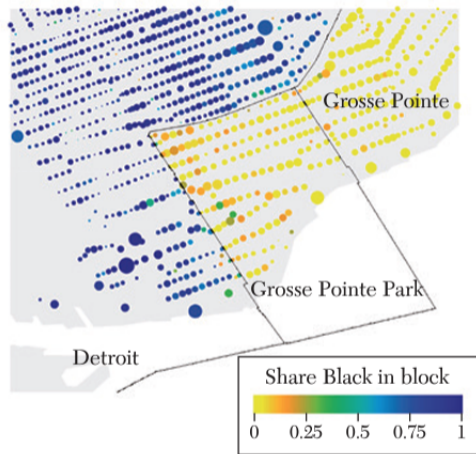


Figure 7. Example of Boundary Discontinuity in Black Residential Share: Detroit and Grosse Pointe Park, MI, 2020

Evidence on Behavioral Response to School Redistricting and Choice

- School redistricting
 - SABs need to change frequently to meet community needs
 - Repeated opportunity to address these issues at a low cost
 - Fraught local politics
 - Behavioral response to progressive redistricting is important, may seriously eat away at integration gains (Bjerre-Nielsen and Gandil, 2023)
 - Extensive evidence about the capitalization of "school quality" in real estate markets (Black 1999, Collins and Kaplan 2017, Ding et al. 2023)
- School choice
 - Expansion of charter schools has increased segregation (Monarrez, 2023)
 - Centralized lotteries. Do parents value school effectiveness? Yes, but they value school demographic composition to a greater degree (Abdulkadiroglu et al. 2020)
 - Spectre of private school sector (school voucher programs)

Takeaways

- Racial segregation in the US remains big problem
- Many policy tools available to redress it
- Much low hanging fruit to make marginal gains on school integration
- Greater (costlier) structural change needed to achieve large gains in racial equity
- Expectations need to be tempered by behavioral response, policy must account for this response