

Segregation Now, Segregation Tomorrow, Segregation Forever? Racial and Economic Isolation and Dissimilarity in Rural Black Belt Schools in Alabama*

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ABSTRACT School racial and economic segregation trends in the United States have increased since the high point of school integration in the 1980s. Current scholarship rarely examines segregation trends in rural areas, especially in the rural Black Belt region of the southern United States. The Black Belt was the location of the leading events of the Civil Rights Movement and where white residents exhibited overt and violent resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education*. This landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court case prohibited legally mandated racial segregation in schools. Our study examines patterns of racial and economic isolation and dissimilarity in the Alabama Black Belt to determine the contemporary nature of school and neighborhood segregation in the region. We use a Critical Race Spatial Analysis framework to conceptualize the study, and we show that segregation patterns have continued and, in some cases, worsened in the last three decades. The forces driving these patterns are different from in the past, stemming from student population changes rather than students' distribution within school districts. Based on these findings, we explain solutions that include implementing school enrollment policy changes alongside policies that incentivize population growth and economic development.

Introduction

One historic feature of education in rural regions of the United States is that most students attend racially and economically isolated schools (Logan and Burdick-Will 2017). Many white southerners in rural regions violently resisted the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ban of legally mandated school racial segregation and subsequent racial integration efforts. White southerners also created racially exclusive private schools known as "segregation academies" (Bagley 2018:2). Despite this resistance, schools in the South would still, for a time, become more integrated than schools in the North, reaching peak numerical integration levels in the 1980s. Subsequent legal decisions led to a retreat of these trends in the 1990s and 2000s (Orfield and Frankenberg 2014; Reardon and Owens 2014). For example, school

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racial isolation trends in the United States, including in the South, are approaching pre-*Brown* levels. The percentage of black students attending 90–100 percent nonwhite schools was 36.4 percent in 2016, up 12.4 percentage points since 1988 (Orfield et al. 2019).

As researchers frequently explore the degree and nature of segregation across geographic regions, such as the South (and North, East, and West), investigating these topics in rural America is less common. Rural places often get forgotten, or even worse, the labeling of a place as rural brings a social construction of being labeled a problem (Biddle and Azano 2016). In this article, we examine a rural region rich with civil rights history. We suggest that understanding inequality in this region is a critical component of achieving racial justice goals in American society.

The Black Belt is a vast rural region of the United States that spans 600 counties from Virginia to East Texas (and runs through Alabama). A history of racial exclusion has shaped the development of this rural region. The Black Belt acquired its name based on the rich, dark soil that allowed white residents to become wealthy from the forced labor of black slaves when agriculture drove the U.S. economy in the early days of settler colonialism through the late 19th century. The name “Black Belt” is now frequently used to reflect the high numbers of black residents in the region. In response to racial oppression, residents like the late John Lewis from the Black Belt of Alabama pushed the region to center stage during the Civil Rights Movement. The region held important events, including Rosa Parks’ arrest, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965.

The progress found in the Civil Rights Movement’s inspirational moments has faded from present reality to historical memory. Currently, Alabama Black Belt counties (17 of the state’s 67 counties) face economic and educational struggles. According to the Alabama State Department of Education (ASDE 2019), 30 of Alabama’s 76 “failing” schools in 2019 were in Black Belt counties. The median household income is significantly lower in the Black Belt than in other Alabama counties and much lower than the rest of the United States (ACS 2019). Black Belt residents are among the most vulnerable in American society, especially since they receive minimal income and have low educational attainment levels (Wimberley, Morris, and Harris 2014).

The purpose of this study is to investigate contemporary school enrollment patterns in Alabama Black Belt counties (hereafter interchangeably referred to as the Black Belt). It is necessary to examine trends in the Alabama portion of the Black Belt precisely because of its history from slavery to civil rights, including the critical role its residents played in U.S. racial integration policy during the Civil Rights Movement. This

article explains how racial and economic isolation and dissimilarity patterns have changed during the last three decades to understand the current state of school racial segregation in the region.

We chose to focus on Alabama rather than the entire Black Belt region because policy, social, and racial context differs across states in the United States. The response of white Alabamians to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and subsequent “politics of white rights” strategy developed by Alabama’s leaders like George Wallace has been historically scrutinized, leaving it necessary to understand the wake of this history on contemporary trends (Bagley 2018). In the United States, there are nuances in the policy context at each state. For example, explicit (unenforceable) school segregation language was not removed from Alabama’s state constitution until 2020. The state subsidized white flight to private schools in the 1960s and the state received a rare statewide desegregation decree in 1967 (Bagley 2018). To determine where this history now leaves the present, we examine segregation patterns alongside population trends and private school enrollment characteristics. We identify and explain reasons for the continued isolation of black students in rural Black Belt schools in Alabama. To do so, we answer the following research questions:

1. Has racial isolation changed from 1990 to 2018 in schools in Alabama’s Black Belt?
2. How do school and neighborhood dissimilarity trends shape racial isolation patterns in Alabama’s Black Belt from 1990 to 2018?
3. How do demographic changes and private school enrollment trends shape racial isolation patterns in Alabama’s Black Belt from 1990 to 2018?
4. Has economic inequality and school economic isolation changed in Alabama’s Black Belt from 1990 to 2018?

Our analytical strategy follows a Critical Race Spatial Analysis framework described later in the article. When reflecting on our research and offering policy recommendations, we assume that many advantages stem from racially and economically integrated schools. These advantages exist for students of color and white students alike (Mickelson and Nkomo 2012). For example, school desegregation drastically improves the life chances of students of color, including greater access to educational institutions and occupational status (Wells and Crain 1994). Meanwhile, integrated schools help to reduce stereotyping, increase communication across racial lines, and allow students to cultivate the skills needed to consider and understand a variety of perspectives in a multiracial society (Orfield and Ee 2017).

Integrated schools have benefits, but they have not developed easily. Former Alabama governor George Wallace infamously declared during his inaugural address on January 14, 1963, “segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” Though many people now regard Wallace and his actions during the Civil Rights Movement as disgraceful relics of the past, his legacy still haunts Alabama. As we will show in our research on Alabama schools today, especially those in the Black Belt, it appears that “segregation forever” was not an empty promise.

Defining Segregation

Scholars and lawmakers recognize two types of segregation: *de jure* and *de facto*. *De jure* segregation is segregation through the law, while *de facto* segregation is driven by social forces such as housing preferences (Rothstein 2017). *De jure* and *de facto* distinctions conflate in contemporary discussions on school enrollment patterns because law and policy play a significant role in shaping individual choices and behaviors. Housing zones, school zones, school vouchers, tax credits, and transportation offerings are forces that shape where students live and attend school. Since individual behavior and choices stem from policy decisions, policymakers must design policies to foster diverse and integrated schools, regardless of patterns being labeled *de facto* or *de jure* (Rothstein 2017).

We define segregation as separation based on racial identity or economic circumstance of geographically proximate students. This separation may occur in either law or practice. To understand the nature of segregation in the Black Belt, we compare residential and school patterns using census block group data, county data, and school data. We use the concepts of *isolation* and *dissimilarity* in this comparison. Dissimilarity is the uneven distribution of a subset of individuals within a geographic grouping of individuals (such as a county, school district, state, or another geographic unit). Dissimilarity serves as one factor that leads to segregation. Isolation is the concentration of students of a single race or economic status in one place, and it captures a significant pattern that reflects segregation. In addition to dissimilarity and isolation, we examine descriptive statistics that capture other reasons that lead to segregation, such as private school patterns and racial or economic changes in a region.

Racial Segregation of Schools

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court overturned the “separate but equal” doctrine laid out in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) with the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Though many cite *Brown* as the case that ended school segregation, it did not offer legal remedies for

non-compliance, so desegregation did not occur immediately. Significant changes in American schools were not made until after *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* (1968) and *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* (1969). In *Green* and *Alexander*, the Court required districts that had been segregated by law to create effective desegregation plans immediately. After these rulings, widespread desegregation occurred in the United States for the first time. In 1968, more than 78 percent of black students attended schools that were at least 90 percent black, but by 1972 only 25 percent of black students attended schools that were at least 90 percent black (Orfield 1983). The most significant changes occurred in the South, and the Northeast was the only region in which segregation did not “clearly decline” between 1970 and 2000 (Clotfelter 2004:180).

Only 20 years after *Brown* and six years after *Green*, the courts and government, across levels from local to federal, began to retreat from desegregation mandates. The backslide began with *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974) when the Supreme Court ruled that legislation could not require districts to pursue inter-district desegregation remedies unless litigants proved district lines were intentionally drawn with the goal to ensure segregation. Then, in *Pasadena City Board of Education v. Spangler* (1976), the Supreme Court ruled that once school districts complied with court-ordered desegregation plans (termed *unitary status districts*), they could be released from federal segregation oversight.

A trend of resegregation began in the 1990s and continued through the 2000s. The policies enabling these patterns range from school district decisions to Supreme Court rulings that have moved away from promoting school integration to a more indifferent and even resistant approach (Orfield et al. 2016; Reardon et al. 2012). The changed mindset is reflected in Supreme Court cases like *Milliken v. Bradley* and *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (Ayscue, Frankenberg, and Siegel-Hawley 2017; Clotfelter 2004; Frankenberg 2017; Kotok et al. 2017).

This shift in the United States Supreme Court’s position on integration has shaped segregation patterns today, and several related factors contribute to increased school racial segregation. First, because school attendance zones are typically place-based, residential segregation patterns translate into school segregation (De la Roca, Ellen, and Steil 2018; Frankel and Volij 2011; Mordechay and Orfield 2017; Siegel-Hawley, Diem, and Frankenberg 2018). Second, white flight, whether to new homes or private schools, increases school segregation (Caetano and Maheshri 2017; Clotfelter 2004). Third, new school choice programs increase school segregation in many locations (Frankenberg 2017; Kotok

et al. 2017; Orfield 2013). Fourth, school district secessions, or when community groups separate from a school district and form a district, increase school segregation (Siegel-Hawley et al. 2018). Finally, other factors, such as school boards' political affiliation and in-school tracking patterns, increase segregation in schools and classrooms (De Fraja and Martínez-Mora 2014; Macartney and Singleton 2018).

While these factors help explain school racial segregation patterns across the United States, we focus on those pertinent to the demographic characteristics and historical realities of the Black Belt. The school districts are large, rural districts that have not seen significant secession movements, perhaps due to a lack of population to allow multiple school districts. Instead, the region faces economic decline and a change in the racial composition of residents. Tuition-based private schools historically have also affected enrollment patterns in the Black Belt. Private schools only serve 9 percent of students across the United States, but they serve disproportionate numbers of white and wealthy students (Ee, Orfield, and Teitell 2018). According to the Private School Review (2020), private schools in Alabama have a nonwhite enrollment of just 21 percent, and this number is much smaller when looking at black student enrollment alone. However, private school enrollment in Alabama differs drastically by county. For example, in Winston county (a non-Black Belt county), private schools enroll 2.1 percent of students, the lowest in the state; whereas private schools in Choctaw county (a Black Belt county) enroll 29.3 percent, which is the highest rate in Alabama. When ranked by proportion of the population that attends private schools, four Black Belt counties are in the top 10 (Gore 2019).

Private Schools and School Segregation in the South and the Black Belt

In states of the former Confederacy like Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, resistance to *Brown* oscillated between refusal, diversion, and violence. One common resistance tactic was to implement facially neutral choice policies that had implied segregative intent. For example, under voluntary “freedom of choice” plans, parents could choose which schools their children would attend, thereby providing a façade of integration potential. These plans utilized “the discretion of parents and unofficial coercion [as] substitute[s] for the artificial criteria of school placement boards” (Yale Law School Journal 1973:1439). The result was a continuation of dual (black and white) school systems. Freedom of choice plans hypothetically provided students of color and their parents with the opportunity to select a school other than an assigned racially isolated school. However, only a few black students integrated white schools, and nearly no white students chose to attend black schools

(Irons 2002; Raffel 1998). The Supreme Court prohibited exclusive use of freedom of choice plans as a desegregation strategy due to their ineffectiveness (*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* 1968).

After *Green*, when the Court removed the possibility of a dual public system, white students turned to tuition-based private schools, whose enrollments increased significantly in the 1970s (Champagne 1973; Clotfelter 2004; Yale Law School Journal 1973). In areas that lacked private schools, new ones rapidly opened, and these have come to be known as “segregation academies” (Bagley 2018:2). At their inception, these schools served only white families and were initially supported by public-school systems and even state governments. Champagne (1973) shows that, in Mississippi, the state subsidized an extensive range of private school needs from teacher salaries and books to security guards and desks. Alabama also used the power of the state government to sponsor racially exclusive private schools. Although the practice of state subsidization of private segregation academies was eventually ruled unconstitutional, the academies themselves can still be found across the South and they still maintain overwhelmingly majority-white enrollments (Bagley 2018).

Despite the resistance tactics that southerners used, the federal government forced many schools in public districts in the South to integrate. States of the former Confederacy maintained, for a brief period, among the least segregated schools in the United States (Boger and Orfield 2009). For example, in 1991, 26 percent of black students in the South were in 90–100 percent nonwhite schools compared to 50 percent of black students in the Northeast (Orfield and Lee 2006). Segregation academies remained open, but the South still made progress with racial integration.

Recently, public schools in the South have seen much resegregation. Releases from court desegregation orders in the last thirty years have limited the primary legal tool used to ensure that school districts maintain integrated schools. Many areas in the South used (often implicitly, but sometimes explicitly) court releases as an opportunity to redraw school boundaries in ways that increase segregation (Orfield and Frankenberg 2014; Rosiek and Kinslow 2015).

There is less research on recent segregation patterns in the Black Belt than there is in southern states overall. This lack of research is surprising because the Black Belt is historically (in)famous for segregation and integration issues. The region continues to face racial isolation and economic hardship, reflecting patterns across the United States in which rural minorities are among the most economically disadvantaged members of American society (Hertz and Silva 2020; Slack 2014; Slack and

Jensen 2002). The Black Belt is no exception. It is imperative to study the nature of racial and economic isolation in rural areas like the Black Belt because rural schools that serve the most disadvantaged students are often in areas of intense historical oppression (Schafft and Biddle 2014). As one scholar put it, these areas are crucial to understanding racial equality in the United States because they are the areas where the “institutions of racial opposition were first established and, consequently, the last to be dismantled” (Snipp 1996:140).

Since black students have faced a long legacy of oppression, discrimination, and injustice, we must seek to understand the current situation in the Black Belt, which, in a sense, serves as a “benchmark for progress toward racial and ethnic equality in the United States” (Slack and Jensen 2002:229). Rural sociologists have focused on economic disparities in the Black Belt as they relate to employment opportunities (Slack and Jensen 2002), income inequality (Gyawali et al. 2008; Hertz and Silva 2020), and persistent poverty (Sherman 2014). We study educational disparities because they exacerbate this economic stagnation. While analyzing school trends, we must also consider recent policy movements that see federal administrations push for a privatized education model. The historical and political context shows the need to think deeply about segregation and equity and how these intersect with emerging school choice models, especially in the Black Belt, where freedom of choice plans were used to continue racial segregation. Finally, we must also consider school segregation patterns alongside residential changes. Demographic changes in a region, such as population decline or increasing percentages of older residents, relate to a loss of resources and services (Theide et al. 2017).

Consequences of School Segregation

The Supreme Court of the United States ruled that separate is not equal in *Brown v. Board* (1954). The Court’s decision was influenced by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark, who presented research showing segregation caused black students to perceive themselves as inferior to white students (*Brown* 1954). School racial segregation also hurts student achievement. When students of color are isolated in majority-nonwhite and high-poverty schools, they do not get the same benefits as wealthy and white peers, exacerbating the achievement gap between black and white students (Ayscue et al. 2017; Clotfelter 2004; Ladd 2008; Mordechay and Orfield 2017). In explaining the black-white student test score gap, Ladd writes, “the more unevenly students of different races are distributed across schools, the more potential there is for resources, such as quality teachers, to be unevenly distributed by race” (2008:313).

Condrón et al. (2013) also show school segregation contributes to the black-white student achievement gap, mainly due to differences in resources. Mordechay and Orfield (2017) explain that students of color in racially isolated schools are more likely to have larger classrooms, higher dropout rates, and higher teacher turnover levels.

Segregation also affects school culture. Using data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002, Ackert (2018) shows school diversity shapes students' attitudes toward school and behavioral engagement in coursework and extracurricular activities. Her findings support a paradox where students in racially diverse schools are less likely to report liking school, but at the same time, are more likely to be engaged in coursework (Ackert 2018:157). Stretesky and Hogan (2005) examine the effects of school segregation on disorder and violence in schools and find isolated poverty helps drive disruption. They explain this occurs for multiple reasons, including that poverty (1) weakens collective socialization and limits student exposure to prosocial behavior, (2) lowers students' access to social capital, (3) reduces the levels of available social control, and (4) leads to increased friction based on the differential opportunities students face (Stretesky and Hogan 2005:407).

It is also helpful to consider the inverse of the negative effects of school segregation, which are the positive effects of school integration. Racially diverse schools provide benefits to students of color and white students alike. These benefits include fostering critical thinking skills needed in a multiracial society, allowing students to develop diverse friend groups, and reducing stereotyping and bias (Ayscue et al. 2017; Eberhardt 2019; Mickelson and Nkomo 2012; Orfield and Ee 2017; Wells and Crain 1994). Integration improves the life chances of black students, leading to greater access to higher education institutions and improved occupational status (Wells and Crain 1994). Students who attend integrated schools “are more likely to have high test scores and grades, to graduate high school, attend college, and graduate from college” (Mordechay and Orfield 2017:198). Interracial contact as a child carries benefits for individuals throughout their life. For example, the experience of racially diverse relationships as a child leads to diverse relationships as an adult (Merlino, Steinhardt, and Wren-Lewis 2019). The benefits of interracial contact may extend beyond individual students to society, potentially reducing racial tensions that have historically plagued the United States.

Critical Race Spatial Analysis

The conceptual understanding that drives our research methodology comes from an emerging line of inquiry termed *Critical Race Spatial*

Analysis, expressed here as “CRSA” (Morrison et al. 2017). CRSA aims to consider the intersection of space and race and problematize what superficially appears to be race-neutral places shaped by purportedly race-neutral policies. In our example in Alabama, race has, in a legal sense, technically been removed from considerations about the distribution of housing, students, and schools across the Black Belt. However, as evident even with just the racially colloquialized name “the Black Belt,” race remains a prominent part of residents’ lived reality in the region. The CRSA framing prompts us to map and analyze students’ racial distribution into schools within Black Belt counties and inform our rationale for selecting race variables to examine while considering isolation and dissimilarity. We also analyze how these trends intersect with economic inequality to understand the full scope of disadvantage in the region. We reflect on the intersection of race and economic inequality in our discussion.

In addition to adding conceptual justification for methodological choices, critical race theories also force researchers to think deeply about the implications of their findings and what they reveal about a society founded on white supremacy. Our discussion of results wrestles with two main implications of findings in this regard. One, we are sensitive to the concern that segregation and integration research often promulgates false notions of black inferiority (e.g., some may wrongly assume black students cannot learn in schools comprised of all black students). When we discuss findings, we remind readers that our recommendations aim to combat racial inequality rather than perpetuate false racial inferiority notions. Two, critical scholars note that one prominent feature of critical race theories is they suggest an element of permanence to racism in U.S. society (Bell 1980; Ladson-Billings 1998). As we explain our findings and policy recommendations, we consider the idea of permanence. Admissions of permanence should not lead to apathy, and we should always seek to improve racial inequality issues. Still, it is essential to note that changes within a system founded on white supremacy are likely incremental and inherently will struggle to upend racism in its entirety.

As we consider our findings, CRSA gives us the tools to consider the meaning the numbers have regarding racism and permanence. It also helps us consider ways to mitigate to systemic race issues, while forcing us to acknowledge the drawbacks of these strategies. We can improve individuals’ lived conditions, but there are significant challenges to eliminating all barriers that stem from systemic racism.

Methods

Researching and Defining the Black Belt

The Alabama Black Belt is a vast rural region and was home to most of the state's plantations and slaves in the pre-Civil War period. This region is among the most economically challenged areas in the United States. We define the Alabama Black Belt using a traditionalist perspective. Under this view, Black Belt counties are those whose fertile, black prairie soil allowed for a widespread plantation economy in the antebellum period. We identify Black Belt counties as those located in the historical geographic region instead of identifying them based on contemporary racial demographics. We identify the following counties as members of the traditional Black Belt: Barbour, Bullock, Butler, Choctaw, Crenshaw, Dallas, Greene, Hale, Lowndes, Macon, Marengo, Montgomery, Perry, Pike, Russell, Sumter, and Wilcox (Winemiller 2009). Our selection captures all the traditional rural, Black Belt counties in Alabama based on geographic characteristics. Pickens County has not been included in our list of traditional Black Belt counties because only a small portion of the county has the characteristic black, fertile soil. This difference in soil composition reduced the county's ability to foster cotton production and large plantations for which the Black Belt was known. Our definition is consistent with the work of Tullos (2004), Gyawu et al. (2015), and Li et al. (2015).

We acknowledge that others have defined the Black Belt based on culture or racial composition (Driskell and Embry 2007). However, since we examine racial changes in the region, defining the region based on racial characteristics would problematize our analysis, as we would be selecting on our dependent variable. However, this newer, racially charged definition of the Black Belt relates to our traditional, geographic definition because the region's characteristic soil encouraged an economy fueled by cotton, the production of which was primarily driven by African American slaves. Even after slavery ended, a prominent African American population continued to live in the region.

The Alabama Black Belt counties we selected have a legacy of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial oppression, so it is essential to detail contemporary racial diversity patterns and economic opportunity there. Our research helps capture the nature of racial inequality in a politically charged region of the United States. Meanwhile, the rurality of the Black Belt allows us to consider how race and inequality issues unfold in rural places.

Data

We use residential and school enrollment data. The residential data come from the U.S. Census Bureau’s decennial count in 1990, 2000, and 2010, and its American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates from 2014 to 2018. The dataset includes characteristics of residents in census block groups disaggregated by race and income. The school enrollment data are from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Common Core of Data (CCD). We use school data to reflect the census and ACS periods, 1990–1991, 2000–2001, 2010–2011, and 2017–2018. The school dataset includes the universe of school enrollment in individual public schools disaggregated by race and free and reduced lunch status. Table 1 shows each variable we identified in our analysis and each variable’s geographic level and data source.

Analyses

The primary analyses rely on measures known as the isolation index and the dissimilarity index. These indices are standard measures researchers use in segregation studies (Massey and Denton 1988). We use the

Table 1. Variables and Data Sources used to Analyze Isolation and Dissimilarity in the Alabama Black Belt.

Variable	Geographic Level	Source(s)
Resident population, disaggregated by race	Census Block Group and County	Census (1990, 2000, 2010), American Community Survey (2014–2018)
Students in private schools	County	Census (1990, 2000, 2010), American Community Survey (2014–2018)
Resident population, disaggregated by age	County	Census (1990, 2000, 2010), American Community Survey (2014–2018)
Median household income	County	Census (1990, 2000, 2010), American Community Survey (2014–2018)
Student population, disaggregated by race	Universe of Public Schools, Sample of Private Schools	National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (1990–1991, 2000–2001, 2010–2011, 2017–2018)
Student population, disaggregated by Free and Reduced Lunch status	Universe of Public Schools, Sample of Private Schools	National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data (1990–1991, 2000–2001, 2010–2011, 2017–2018)

indices to determine patterns across Alabama neighborhoods (census block groups) and schools in 1990, 2000, 2010, and 2018. The first set of analyses uses the isolation index to examine the racial isolation of black students in schools. The isolation index shows the extent to which students are in schools with other students of their same race. For example, a black student isolation index score of 0.95 means a black student attends, on average, a school with 95 percent black students. We use the following isolation index equation:

$$\text{Isolation} = \sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{x_i}{X_T} \right) \left(\frac{x_i}{t_i} \right)$$

where n is the number of schools; x_i is the population of students with a given characteristic (e.g., black students) in school i ; t_i is the total population in school i ; and X_T is the total population of students with a characteristic (e.g., black students) in the broader geographic unit (e.g., all students in a state or county).

We consider the school isolation indices at different geographic levels so we can compare trends. These include examining the school isolation index with all students in the state, all students within the Black Belt, all students not within the Black Belt, and all students within each county. These isolation indices allow us to make claims such as “a black student in (all of Alabama, or just the Black Belt, or just counties not in the Black Belt, or just in county X), on average, attends a school that has X percent of black students.” We chose to examine different geographic units to see if there were patterns unique to the Black Belt relative to the rest of Alabama because it has already been reported that the state has experienced racial segregation in metro schools (Frankenberg and Taylor 2017). In the findings section, we provide a map of school isolation to show how the indices compare across the counties in the Black Belt at different time points. We also offer tables to show the trends across time points and geographic units.

Isolation of students in schools may reflect other trends such as the overall population in a region. For example, students in counties with high majorities of black students have a greater chance to attend racially isolated schools. We use the dissimilarity index to account for issues related to the relationship between residential and school trends. The dissimilarity index shows how evenly individuals from different demographic and racial backgrounds are dispersed within a geographic unit. Using this index, we determine how evenly, based on race, students are spread within schools in the Black Belt and how evenly, based on race,

residents are distributed within neighborhoods in the Black Belt. We use the following dissimilarity equation:

$$\text{Dissimilarity} = (1/2) \sum_{i=1}^n \left(\frac{x_i}{X_T} \right) \left(\frac{y_i}{Y_T} \right)$$

where n is the number of schools (or census block groups for the neighborhood analysis); x_i is the population of those with the first characteristic (e.g., black students) in a school or census block group i ; and X_T is the total population of those with the first characteristic (e.g., black students) of the broader geographic unit (e.g., all students or residents in a county). Meanwhile, y_i is the population of those with the second characteristic (e.g., white students) in school or census block group i ; and Y_T is the total population of those with the second characteristic (e.g., white students) of the broader geographic unit (e.g., all students or residents in a county).

We identify school and neighborhood dissimilarity within counties (students across schools within counties and residents across census block groups within counties) and report school dissimilarity with neighborhood dissimilarity findings to compare differences. In the Alabama Black Belt, most county boundaries are school district boundaries, assuring us that a county-wide measure is appropriate. The tandem reporting of schools and neighborhoods allows us to identify if students' distribution is more even than residents' distribution. This comparison helps us determine if isolation relates to school dissimilarity, neighborhood dissimilarity, both, or neither.

The dissimilarity and isolation indices together help understand the extent and nature of school segregation in the Alabama Black Belt. Isolation shows if racial isolation has improved or worsened. Dissimilarity shows whether black students in the Black Belt attend schools separate from white students because of an uneven distribution of students or residents or if school segregation relates to different trends. These different trends may include population changes or attendance in private schools. If both isolation and dissimilarity are high, this means there is diversity in the available school population, but students are not evenly spread (and this spread is likely a cause of isolation). If there is high isolation but low dissimilarity in the school population, there is not a diverse population of public-school students. The latter could mean that few white students live in the Black Belt or the white students who live there exit the local public-school system in some other way, such as enrolling in private schools.

With the alternative possibilities of exit and private schools in mind, we examine private school trends in Alabama to identify how enrollment demographic characteristics change. The NCES provides information about private schools on a biennial basis, but the NCES notes this is only a private school sample because not all participate in data collection. Therefore, we use two strategies to get a better understanding of private school trends. First, we restrict our dataset to include only private schools in the Black Belt counties that report data across each of the years we analyze. Using these data, we compare descriptive changes in these private schools' enrollments. Second, we examine trends in reported private school enrollment available from U.S. Census Bureau. Surveyed respondents identify if their children enrolled in school in the past three months, and if so, what type of school (public, private) and their grade level. Using these two strategies, we consider how private schooling has affected racial isolation in public schools in the Black Belt.

We also identify descriptive trends of racial population patterns of residents in the Black Belt to understand another potential cause of school isolation. If there are population changes in the share of black residents, these changes likely affect the school population. We disaggregate these findings by age cohorts to consider if the adult and student populations change at different rates.

In addition to considering the racial composition of schools and descriptive patterns of Black Belt counties, we examine school economic isolation patterns and regional economic patterns. For these analyses, we show the free-and-reduced-price lunch (FRL) isolation index of schools (using the same isolation index equation above, replacing race with FRL and non-FRL) and changes to the median income of Black Belt counties over time compared to other counties in the state. The FRL indicators provide general understandings, but they only estimate economic status due to reporting issues. In our dataset of schools, 16.7 percent had no FRL data in any year. Within this set of schools reporting, 17.5 percent of the FRL data are missing in 2017–2018, 29.3 percent in 2010–2011, and 15.1 percent in 2000–2001. There is no FRL data for 1990–1991. The FRL data are incomplete, so we consider them a point of reference rather than a clear description of trends.

Findings

Continued Isolation in Black Belt Schools

We ask for our first research question how racial isolation changed in schools at different time points from 1990 to 2018. The black student isolation index suggests a continuation of black student isolation in schools

across Alabama and continued levels of extreme isolation in the Black Belt. As shown in Figure 1, isolation patterns occur consistently throughout the Black Belt with few exceptions. The figure depicts the black student isolation rate in the Black Belt at different time points. The rate of

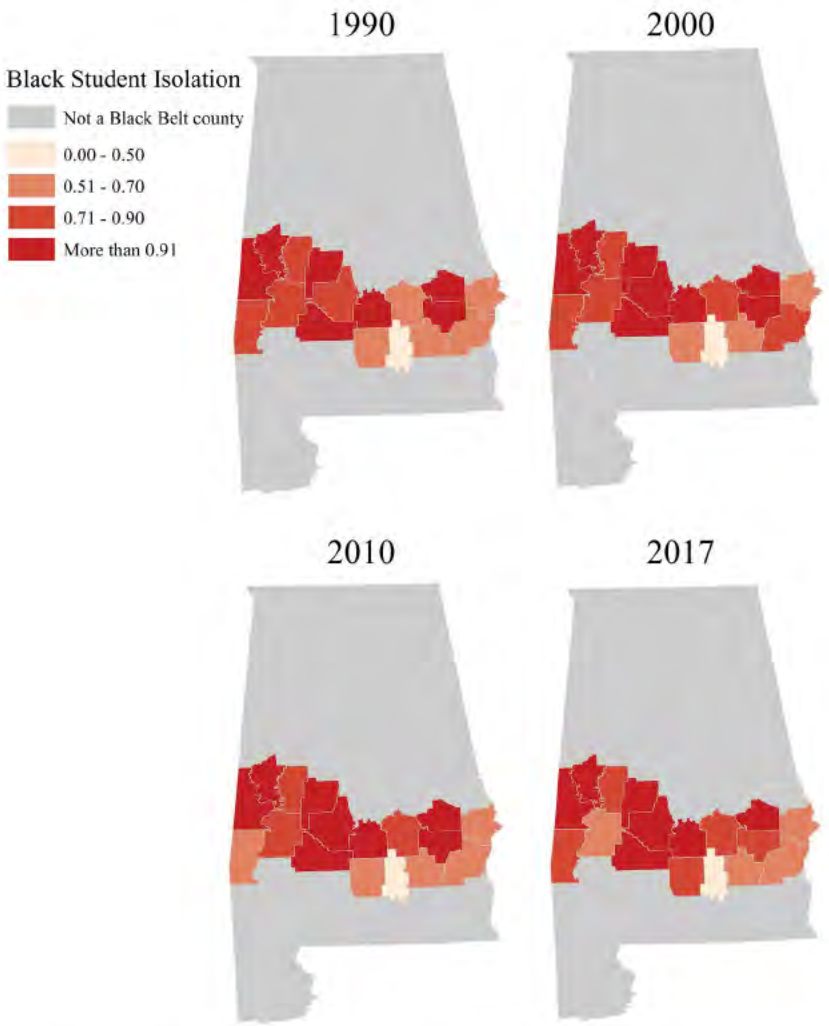


Figure 1. Changes in Black Student Racial Isolation in Alabama Schools.
Note: The Isolation index can be understood as the proportion of black students in a school attended, on average, by a black student. A 0.95 means that a black student, on average, goes to school with 95% black students.

isolation in nearly every county looks remarkably similar in 1990 as it did in 2017–2018.

To help interpret Figure 1, consider that the isolation index is the proportion of black students in a school attended, on average, by a black student. A score of 0.95 means that a black student, on average, attends school with 95 percent black students. In all but one of the counties in the Black Belt, black students, on average, attend majority-black schools. Further, black students in most Black Belt counties, on average, attend school with more than 70 percent black students and, in many cases, more than 90 percent black students. This finding remains consistent at each time point. The primary exception to the patterns seen across the Black Belt is Crenshaw County, which falls within the Black Belt according to our *a priori* definition, but it is unique in that it has maintained a majority white population for decades. This county's racial characteristics likely explain its differences in black student isolation patterns.

We expand on the first research question and investigate if the patterns in the Black Belt reflect patterns throughout Alabama. We find that while the isolation of black students in the Black Belt remains similar in 1990–1991 and 2017–2018, isolation of the statewide black student population declines slightly. As shown in Table 2, on average, a black student in Alabama went to a school with 64.5 percent black students in 1990, but in 2017–2018 this number dropped to 61.4 percent. This pattern also occurred in non-Black Belt counties. Meanwhile, the isolation of black students in Black Belt counties slightly increased (though more or less remains similar at the different time points). In 1990, a black student in the Black Belt, on average, attended school with 78.3 percent black students. This number is 82.9 percent in 2000, 83.1 percent in 2010, and 79.7 percent in 2017–2018. These numbers inform us of two trends. First, while black students living in non-Black Belt counties in Alabama have become slightly less isolated in schools during the selected periods, black students in Black Belt counties have not. Second, the difference in isolation levels for black students in Black Belt versus non-Black Belt counties is worse in 2017–2018 than it was in 1990.

School Dissimilarity Shrinking Relative to Neighborhood Dissimilarity

We ask for our second research question how school and neighborhood dissimilarity patterns change at different time points. Dissimilarity is an index that shows how evenly students are distributed within a geographic unit (we examine how evenly students are spread across schools within counties and census block groups within counties). The second research question's answer helps determine if schools are racially isolated because students are unevenly distributed within the public-school system or if

Table 2. Black Student Racial Isolation in Alabama Schools.

	1990 Isolation	2000 Isolation	2010 Isolation	2017–2018 Isolation	1990–2017 Difference
All counties	0.645	0.681	0.655	0.614	–0.031
Black Belt	0.783	0.829	0.831	0.797	0.014
Non-Black Belt	0.593	0.628	0.597	0.561	–0.032

Note: Data from the National Center for Education Statistics. The Isolation index can be understood as the proportion of black students in a school attended, on average, by a black student. A 0.95 means that a black student, on average, attends school with 95% black students.

other factors such as the uneven racial distribution of residents or private school enrollment explain isolation.

Figure 2 shows the dissimilarity within counties in census block groups on the Y-axis and dissimilarity within counties in school enrollment on the X-axis. The middle line represents equal dissimilarity in census block groups and schools (if dissimilarity is 0.2 across the census block groups and 0.2 across schools, it falls on the line and means dissimilarity is the same for both). Depending on where a county falls, this graph shows if dissimilarity is higher at the neighborhood level (falling above the line) or at the school level (below the line). This depiction helps show how neighborhood and school patterns relate. If there is more neighborhood dissimilarity than school dissimilarity, racial isolation in schools relates to factors like demographic characteristics or housing policy. If there is more school dissimilarity than neighborhood dissimilarity, isolation relates to factors like boundary lines or school policy.

As Figure 2 shows, school and neighborhood dissimilarity patterns are not consistent at the different time points. Figure 2 suggests that school dissimilarity has declined, but neighborhood dissimilarity has not. This trend has caused the distribution of residents to be more dissimilar than the distribution of students. Racial isolation in Black Belt schools has continued, but neighborhoods are more racially dissimilar than schools.

Dissimilarity robustness checks. The American Community Survey provides an estimated count of individuals. At some geographic units, the estimations have a large margin of error. This margin is especially apparent in smaller geographic units. For example, across Alabama block groups in the 2014–2018 ACS, the mean estimated total for white residents is 1,415 with a margin of error of 334, and the mean estimated total for black residents is 965 with a margin of error of 252. This error could affect our understanding of the relationship between neighborhood dissimilarity and school dissimilarity.

We conducted robustness checks based on this concern. We created two counterfactual scenarios: Using the estimates to develop the greatest possible neighborhood integration scenario and using the estimates to develop the greatest possible segregation scenario. To make the greatest possible integration scenario, we added the margin of error number to the estimates of the minority population in a block group and subtracted the margin of error number from the estimates of the majority population in a block group. To create the greatest possible segregation scenario, we added the margin of error number to the estimates of the majority population in a block group and subtracted the margin of error number from the estimates of the minority population in a block group. Then we created a neighborhood dissimilarity index for these scenarios

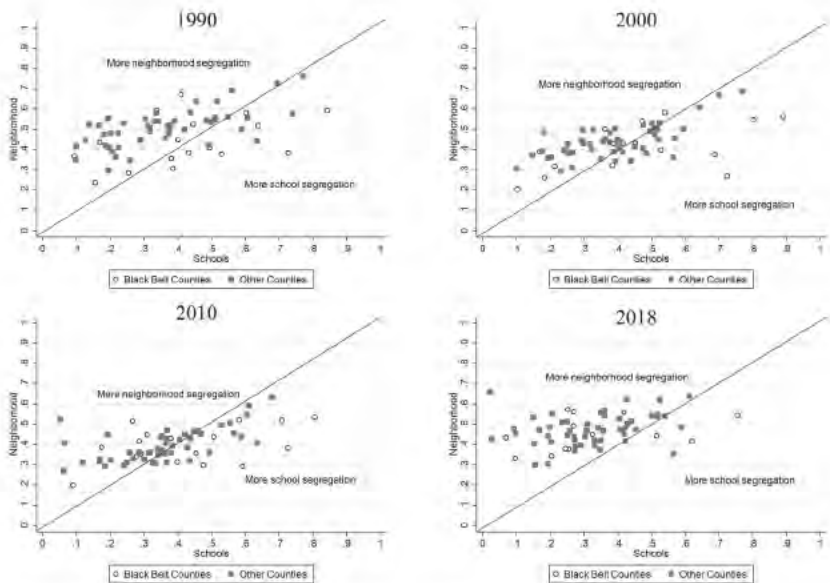


Figure 2. School Segregation and Neighborhood Segregation in Alabama.
Note: Each year has the Census count from that year and NCES data from that school year (e.g., 1990 has 1990 Census and 1990–1991 NCES data). The exception is 2017, which has ACS 2014–2018 five-year estimates. The x and y axes show the dissimilarity index, or how evenly white and black students are spread across schools and neighborhoods. 0 represents perfectly even distribution; 1.0 represents perfectly uneven distribution.

by county. We compared these indices to the school dissimilarity index, as we did in the original analysis (the schools had full counts, so there was no need to change them).

These counterfactual scenarios indeed caused a wide band for the neighborhood dissimilarity index. For example, the greatest possible integration scenario reduced the statewide index 0.12 (to a new dissimilarity index of 0.47). The greatest possible segregated scenario increased the statewide index 0.22 (to a new dissimilarity index of 0.81). The magnitude difference in these changes suggests that our original estimates are more likely to underestimate the strength of our findings than to change the direction of the results. Neighborhoods are more likely to have greater dissimilarity than schools than our original findings, rather than the trend flipping to see schools more dissimilar than neighborhoods.

To extend the robustness check, we compared every county’s new indices to their original dissimilarity indices based on the extreme scenarios to determine how the margin of error could change our county-by-county

findings. Our counterfactual findings continue to show that the effect of the greatest possible integration scenario is less extreme than the greatest possible segregation scenario, and our findings are most likely conservative rather than inaccurate. Our original patterns held in 46 counties out of 67 in Alabama. Further, five counties saw the direction change in favor of our initial findings in the extreme segregation scenario. There were 16 counties in the extreme integration that scenario did have a reversal in trends where schools became more dissimilar than neighborhoods, but even this was quite close. The average difference in the extreme scenario between schools and neighborhoods was -0.06 , meaning that even in the extreme integration scenario, most counties almost had a tie between the indices. These patterns held in the Black Belt counties. Only six out of the 17 counties flipped in the extreme integration scenario, and the flip reflected less than an average of a 0.05 difference in the dissimilarity indices between schools and neighborhoods.

Based on these robustness checks, we feel comfortable saying that our findings for the dissimilarity portion of the analysis represent the best understanding of the evidence available. Although it is possible in some situations the patterns may reverse, it is more likely that we have understated the racial dissimilarity trends between schools and neighborhoods in Alabama and the Black Belt. These robustness checks lead us to believe that our results are conservative rather than reflect inaccurate directionality. However, these concerns suggest our findings should be re-analyzed when the 2020 U.S. Census count becomes available.

Dissimilarity findings summary. Since racial isolation in schools is still high (as shown with the findings to the first research question), one indication of the dissimilarity findings is the student population changed in different ways than the neighborhood population from 1990 to 2018. The explanation for high school isolation but low school dissimilarity is that most students in counties are of one race, which means they may be mathematically distributed evenly across schools, even in isolated circumstances (e.g., if 98 percent students in a county are black and 98 percent of students in every school in a county are black, then school dissimilarity would be 0.00). This understanding means that in our findings, isolation in Black Belt schools remained high even though dissimilarity in schools declined because there were lower shares of white students attending Black Belt public schools overall.

A likely reason for high isolation but low dissimilarity is due to one of two patterns. Either student racial demographic characteristics changed in Black Belt counties, or white students exited the public-school system through private schools, home schools, or other options outside the public-school system. A related possibility explaining why neighborhood

patterns are different than school patterns is that population changes have not occurred consistently across age cohorts. For example, neighborhoods may be more dissimilar because they have many white residents who are not school-aged. Therefore, these residents are not reflected in school population changes. We explore these possibilities next.

Demographic Characteristic Changes and Private Schools

We examine for the third research question reasons for continued isolation in public schools in the Black Belt, which is especially important due to the changes we observed in the dissimilarity indices. Past research suggests white students exit the public-school system via private schools and that many racially exclusive private schools were founded in the South and Black Belt following the *Brown v. Board* decision (Bagley 2018; Champagne 1973). Our private school attendance data show that private schools' current enrollment trends differ from this history in two ways.

First, the racial composition of private schools has changed. The NCES provides a sample of private school enrollment, so it is not a complete picture of all private schools, but this picture is instructive. We find that for the 99 private schools that have reported data since 2001–2002, diversity has increased over time. For example, 87.3 percent of the students in these schools were white in 2001–2002, while 74.2 percent were white in 2017–2018. This trend does not reflect the 100 percent white enrollment seen in the 1960s when these schools opened.

Second, enrollment into private schools has remained steady while the overall student population has decreased. We identify this trend through Census and ACS private school data because the Census Bureau determines the number of residents using private schools in a given tabulated year. Table 3 shows that the number of students and the proportional share of students enrolled in private schools increased in both the Black Belt and the rest of Alabama between 1990 and 2000. Then, there was a noticeable drop in Black Belt private schooling (but not in the rest of the state) from 2000 to 2010. Since 2010, the share of private school students has remained steady across the state despite student enrollment decline. Throughout all years, private school enrollment, as a percentage of total school enrollment, is higher in the Black Belt than in non-Black Belt counties in the state.

These changes in private schooling are challenging to interpret. It seems in the Black Belt, enrollment boomed at the turn of the century, suggesting perhaps an element of continued white flight to private schools. Then, as overall enrollments decline, private schooling began to decrease as well. However, this declined flattened, and this flattening corresponds with the enactment of the Alabama Accountability Act (2013)

Table 3. Change in Enrollment Share of Private School Students in Alabama.

	1990	2000	2010	2017–2018
Non-Black Belt Total	627,074	722,053	729,382	717,947
Non-Black Belt Private	44,956	72,375	77,313	77,939
Non-Black Belt Percent Private	7.17%	10.02%	10.60%	10.86%
Black Belt Total	111,015	115,297	102,719	91,856
Black Belt Private	12,258	16,421	13,776	13,440
Black Belt Percent Private	11.04%	14.24%	13.41%	14.63%

Note: Data from the United States Census Bureau.

(AAA), a tax credit scholarship program that incentivizes private schooling. The AAA gives low-income children scholarships to attend private schools. In an evaluation of the AAA, Barth, Steele, and Quenneville (2018) show in the 2016–2017 school year, of the 4,076 students receiving scholarships, 65 percent of the recipients were black, 19 percent were white, 10 percent were Hispanic, and 6 percent were another race or did not have a race listed. Because the AAA mainly serves minority students, and black students in particular, increased diversity in private schools may relate to the AAA. Still, a cost of this means continuing to maintain (and perhaps even worsen) racial isolation in Black Belt public schools. This policy’s specific effect on these school enrollments leaves a crucial area for future research.

An even greater influence on school enrollment patterns relates to regional demography. As shown in Table 4, the most striking demographic development in the Black Belt is the population’s uneven racial demographic changes. Between 1990 and 2018, the total white population declined 21.6 percent, from 274,620 in 1990 to 215,310 in 2018. This decline in the white population happened despite a 9.47 percent increase in the over-65 white population (42,851 in 1990 to 46,909 in 2018). These changes suggest that the white population in the Black Belt is both shrinking and getting older, leaving fewer white students to attend schools. Meanwhile, the number of black residents living in the Black Belt increased 13.78 percent (270,249 in 1990 to 307,497 in 2018). However, there were declines in both the over-65 population in the Black Belt and the under-18 black populations. Therefore, the

Table 4. Population Changes in the Alabama Black Belt.

	Total Population	White Population	Black Population	White Under 18	Black Under 18	White Over 65	Black Over 65
1990	548,496	274,620	270,249	61,994	94,423	42,851	31,146
2000	568,092	258,455	298,735	54,063	93,943	43,685	29,819
2010	560,166	229,358	308,630	45,860	86,476	42,889	29,994
2018	547,106	215,310	307,497	39,573	75,655	46,909	24,920
Change 1990 to 2018	-0.25%	-21.6%	+13.78%	-36.17%	-19.88%	9.47%	-19.99%

Note: Data from the United States Census Bureau.

overall black population increase is attributable to changes in the adult (18–64) population.

The patterns of under-18 residents do not mirror those in older cohorts. The Black Belt has a lower share of younger black and white residents now than in 1990. Still, the percentage of under-18 white residents declined faster than under-18 black residents (reinforcing the finding that simultaneous increases in private school attendance are due to increasing shares of minority students). In 1990, 28.27 percent of Black Belt residents were younger than 18, while 22.86 percent were younger than 18 in 2018. In 1990, there were 61,994 white children. This number fell to 39,573 by 2018. In 1990, there were 94,423 black children. This number dropped to 75,655 by 2018. During the same time, the Hispanic population of children rose from 488 to 5,975. These changes mean the share of children in the Black Belt went from 36.17 percent white, 59.97 percent black, 0.31 percent Hispanic to 31.65 percent white, 60.50 percent black, and 4.78 percent Hispanic in 2018. The discrepancies in population decline between black and white children led to a more uneven racial balance. In 1990, for every white child, there were 1.52 black children, while in 2018, for every white child, there were 1.91 black children. This shift suggests a significant source of racial isolation in the Black Belt can be attributed to a decline in the number of white students relative to black students.

Heightening Economic Disadvantage in the Black Belt

We examine for our fourth research question the economic disadvantage of residents and students in the Black Belt. In addition to continued school racial isolation in the Black Belt, we find evidence of continued economic disadvantage. The Black Belt is the most economically strained region of the state and perhaps the entire United States. As shown in Figure 3, Alabama has a slightly declining median income when adjusted for inflation, and the gap between the median household income for Black Belt families and non-Black Belt families remains stark. The median income trend adds to our understanding of the current challenges in the Black Belt, where racial isolation and income inequality coincide. When considering median income adjusted for inflation, Alabama has stagnated statewide since the 1990s and is worse than it was in the 2000s overall. The Black Belt counties have continued to fare even worse than these statewide trends.

Patterns in the Black Belt schools also show that students face economic isolation, especially compared to counties outside of the Black Belt. As shown in Table 5, on average, a student in the Black Belt consistently attends a school where 80 percent of the students receive FRL, which is much higher

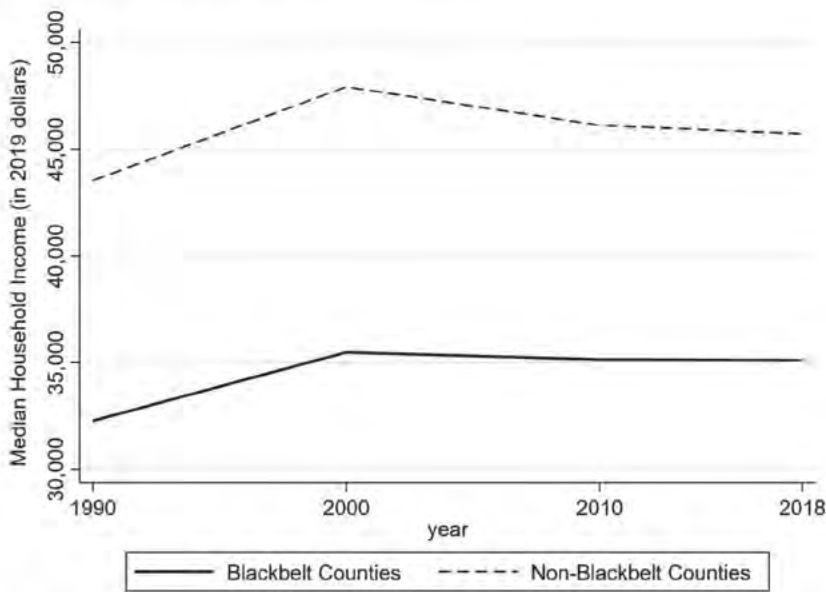


Figure 3. Median Household Income in Alabama (in 2019 dollars adjusted for inflation).
Note: The data from 1990, 2000, and 2010 are from the Decennial Census Count. Data from 2018 are from the American Community Survey.

Table 5. Free and Reduced Lunch Student Isolation in Alabama Schools.

	2000 Isolation	2010 Isolation	2017–2018 Isolation	2000–2017 Difference
All counties	0.595	0.641	0.651	0.056
Black Belt	0.782	0.804	0.801	0.019
Non-Black Belt	0.548	0.611	0.625	0.077

Note: Data from the National Center of Education Statistics. The Isolation index can be understood as the proportion of FRL students in a school attended, on average, by an FRL student. A 0.95 means that a FRL student, on average, attends school with 95% FRL students.

than students in non-Black Belt counties. This trend shows Black Belt students face a double disadvantage of racial and economic isolation.

Discussion and Policy Suggestions

The primary takeaway from these findings is that racial isolation and economic disadvantage continue to persist in schools in the Alabama Black Belt region. Critical Race Theory, and by extension Critical Race

Spatial Analysis, reminds us that there is a level of permanence of racism in U.S. society (Bell 1980; Ladson-Billings 1998). However, as racial differences in schooling persist, the reasons for these patterns have shifted. In the past, white residents lived in the region and opted out of the public-school system to attend private schools. Based on the demographic changes we show, a primary driver of isolation is a disproportionate decrease in the number of white students compared to black students living in the region.

While critical theories suggest racism has an element of permanence, policymakers must find the policies that improve the lived conditions of oppressed people to the greatest extent possible. Policymakers must account for the new forces driving racial inequality in Black Belt schools. Policymakers must explore a set of options that bring economic resources and diversity to the Black Belt rather than relying solely on school integration plans. Racism may have a level of permanence, but we believe that targeted solutions can help mitigate some of the effects of racial and economic oppression in the Black Belt. For example, increased resources would help alleviate issues of outmigration. Residents in many rural places, including those with high levels of black students, continue to face concerns related to their highest achieving students leaving rather than staying and serving the community that educated them (Farmer et al. 2006). We consider these issues and related recommendations in this discussion.

In this discussion, we first describe how our findings compare to past research. Then, considering similarities and differences, we make recommendations on strategies to alleviate racial educational inequality patterns in the Black Belt. We make these recommendations based on the assumption that promoting economic and racial integration helps students in several ways. These ways include the trickle-down of increased resources (Ayscue et al. 2017; Clotfelter 2004; Ladd 2008; Mordechay and Orfield 2017), reductions in racial disparities in test scores and graduation rates (Ladd 2008), lower teacher turnover and smaller classrooms (Mordechay and Orfield 2017), and reductions in bias and expanded interracial friendships (Ayscue et al. 2017; Eberhardt 2019; Mickelson and Nkomo 2012; Orfield and Ee 2017; Wells and Crain 1994). We also assume racial integration helps improve societal divisions. Our recommendations, therefore, rely on prompting integration and expanding resources in the Black Belt region.

New Causes Require New Solutions

Past research suggests many areas in the United States face school segregation for several reasons. These reasons relate to attendance zones,

white flight, private schools, school choice, district secessions, and other political forces (Caetano and Maheshri 2017; Clotfelter 2004; De Fraja and Martínez-Mora 2014; De la Roca et al. 2018; Frankel and Volij 2011; Frankenberg 2017; Kotok et al. 2017; Macartney and Singleton 2018; Mordechay and Orfield 2017; Orfield 2013; Orfield and Frankenberg 2014; Rosiek and Kinslow 2015; Siegel-Hawley et al. 2018). Our findings add to research as we examine the Alabama Black Belt region. We show racial isolation is still the norm in Black Belt schools, that these patterns occur because white and black students are segregated across rather than within districts in the state, and there is a declining population of white students in the Black Belt.

These patterns mean black students learn in separate schools than white students in the Black Belt. These results also suggest that resources are not getting to schools as the region experiences income inequality. In a cultural moment where the zeitgeist of educational reform (and many social reforms) relates to marketplace ideals and neoliberalism, the situation in the Black Belt reflects a reality that free-market plans will struggle to solve issues of systemic racism and segregation. If the free market assumes the most valued products and locations receive resources because of their market value and prestige, those who have the resources have devalued the Black Belt region and moved away. The result is a housing market that has left residents in the Black Belt—and their schools—without resources and economic opportunity for growth.

Based on these concerns, we consider possibilities for change. Some free-market suggestions seem unavoidable due to the nature of the current policy ideology. Still, the trajectory of the Black Belt will not change without government intervention, enhanced resources, and targeted development. If we want to mitigate issues of segregation and resource depletion in the Black Belt, we must either integrate students from inside and outside of the Black Belt, convince those with resources to return, or use state and federal resources to expand available options. This integration can occur through inter-district transfer plans (to move students in and out), changes in housing and land use policy (to draw in resources), and investments in traditional options (to lift those within).

Move Students In and Out—Targeted Choice Plans

The first strategy we suggest will reduce racial and economic isolation issues in Black Belt schools is to target the problem through school enrollment strategies. For example, school busing and student enrollment across district lines, both of which have been used in the past, could relieve isolation in the Black Belt. These plans are fraught with political tension, but there are ways that they can be achieved in the

contemporary policy landscape. For example, city and county districts can develop open enrollment strategies with the language of “improving choices” across district lines (to match current neoliberal reform logics). The state could incentivize these types of plans by providing funding for “expanded choices.” This framing could even potentially find favor with political parties that most closely align themselves with neoliberal strategies.

Of course, inter-district transfer plans have struggled to achieve legal and practical traction after the Supreme Court soured on them during the 1970s (see *Milliken* 1974). However, recent scholarship has offered examples of how these strategies could work if local officials cultivate will and capacity. Holme and Finnigan (2018) show the possibilities of regional frameworks, while Johnson (2019) provides the example of Jefferson County, Kentucky. These examples have achieved success through targeted partnerships. The politics in Alabama may be more challenging than in other locations. Hence, policymakers need to act creatively while using multiple policy options to overcome long-lasting issues in Alabama. One possibility could be a collaboration between regions across geographic locales. This strategy is a difficult option to manage equitably because these partnerships can lead to concerns over the loss of rural school power and rural school closings (Tieken 2014). The solution will require hearing and weighing all voices in the process.

Another strategy policymakers could use is leveraging market-style options that have become popular over the last few decades. Alabama has developed a variety of school choice plans during the 2010s. One of the largest of these is the Alabama Accountability Act (2013; mentioned earlier), which provides tax credit scholarships to families, allowing them to move their children to private schools. Another policy change has been charter school adoption and implementation, and, indeed, one of the most successful integration projects in the state has been a charter school that merged private and public-school populations (Alabama Education Association 2019). There are opportunities to create choice plans to include diversity and integration elements in the design. These include vouchers aimed at only low-income students, weighted lotteries in charter schools, and magnet programs in the traditional public-school sector. These ideas take planning and resources and should be considered potential strategies (not necessarily comprehensive solutions) for racial isolation in Black Belt schools.

The great challenge with using choice-based plans is they have a history of failing when attempting to be used as integration tools. These plans also come at a cost to local public-school districts that are already underfunded and struggling. These challenges mean that this slate of

options comes with caution and that they must be carefully used and designed with integration and diversity in mind (Orfield 2013). When using these plans, policymakers should continue to consider the needs of public districts that serve most students in the state. If not, they are going to make the patterns of segregation and inequality worse.

Draw in Resources—Housing policy

Another strategy to address school segregation is to address housing segregation. Our findings support past research that suggests school segregation and housing segregation have a strong link (Saporito and Hanley 2014). Additionally, economic disadvantage in the Black Belt remains persistent, and its schools continue to experience extreme racial and economic isolation. The school districts within the Black Belt are more evenly sorting students within districts than they used to (based on dissimilarity metrics), but there are fewer white children in these areas. This trend means there is a need for a comprehensive plan that considers schooling and housing simultaneously.

Alabama has one of the highest proportions of black residents to white residents in the country (Kaiser Family Foundation 2018), so there are opportunities for diversity within schools and neighborhoods if policymakers develop strategies to have Alabamians across racial demographic characteristics live near one another. Many schools in Alabama, and the South, were more integrated than in the North during the 1980s (Clotfelter 2004). This history suggests there are possibilities for school diversity if policymakers pull the right levers.

One approach to increase diversity is the use of mixed-use housing zones and low-income housing vouchers. Additionally, when considering new industries, such as where to place new automotive plants (a growing trend in the state), policymakers should work with the private sector to locate these opportunities in locations that lead to diverse neighborhoods. Alabama policymakers could incentivize industries to locate in the Black Belt to encourage economic growth in the region. Targeted siting of employment may bring new economic prospects and diversity if employment opportunities are distributed equally.

While housing policy and employment siting strategies are essential, we must consider that housing policy in rural regions looks different from those found in urban areas. In the rural South (as seen in rural regions throughout the country), the nature and scale of land ownership is different than in urban places experiencing gentrification. This concern means that development may require large-scale land purchases by government or development agencies, something anathema to rural people and families who fought for and rely on the land they own. The

arrival of developers to the area could bring resources not seen in the past, but their arrival may lead to skepticism and tension.

Additionally, gentrification can happen in rural places, but it unfolds differently. It occurs throughout entire towns or counties instead of in select neighborhoods, is more class-based than race-based, and locks out residents of newly developed farmland rather than displacing them (Yagley et al. 2005:44). Recent work shows that as rural communities gentrified in one area in the western United States, the added economic diversity divided the community along class lines. Newcomers brought with them money and other forms of symbolic capital, but rarely did they interact with longstanding residents in meaningful ways (Sherman 2017). The result was recasting old inequality in new ways. A trend like this may happen in the Black Belt without thoughtful planning. Ultimately, immigration plans require collaboration with local, state, and federal stakeholders to ensure that all voices are weighed in the process.

Lift Those Within—Traditional Public Options and Economic Development

As policymakers wrestle with segregation issues, one limiting factor of both integration and inequality is the lack of financial resources found within Black Belt communities. There are extreme differences in economic status in the Black Belt compared to other regions in the state. One straightforward way to improve the financial situation of individuals is to provide them with more economic resources. As integration strategies come fraught with challenges, at minimum, policymakers should allocate resources to lift residents within the Black Belt. Achieving goals of educational inequality is extremely challenging within areas where there is extreme economic hardship. Any plan to integrate and improve schools requires thoughtful and expansive economic development. Schools are a significant piece of the development puzzle. Still, they are only part of the puzzle that requires investment and resources in Black Belt communities that have been neglected.

One resource that would improve the economy of the Black Belt is more expansive access to the Internet. A report by the Equal Justice Initiative (2020) found that in most Black Belt counties, less than 10 percent of residents had broadband Internet in their homes, which is a shocking figure in today's digital world. A lack of broadband access hurts both individuals and businesses alike, and it can be incredibly challenging for students. Government grants to support broadband infrastructure in the Black Belt would help those living there, and these investments may increase the area's potential for drawing in new residents and businesses.

Conclusion

The ideas we presented here are only starting points because there are no easy solutions to solving centuries of racial exclusion and resultant economic hardship. Black residents in the Black Belt region of Alabama have endured racial oppression for generations. These residents have encountered slavery, Jim Crow, and racial violence. Due to these circumstances, many black residents left during the Great Migration during the 20th century. Those who did not leave have shown tremendous courage and resolve. Black residents in the Alabama Black Belt, such as John Lewis, stood toe to toe with the Ku Klux Klan while paving the way for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

The oppression that residents in the Black Belt face now is less explicit than in the violence of the past, but these citizens still endure extreme hardships such as isolation and poverty. The conditions are apparent and appalling, and despite some modest changes in the 1970s and 1980s, they have remained for generations. The time is long overdue to invest in the Black Belt, create policy solutions that lead to equitable educational opportunity, and provide relief from centuries of harm. This study presents the beginnings of research and policymaking that start to right the wrongs of our history of how our society has treated rural Alabamians in the Black Belt. As we consider these issues in Alabama, the next step is to extend this work to consider racial segregation patterns, isolation, and inequality in other states in the Black Belt region besides Alabama.

The solutions to solving problems of racial oppression in the Black Belt have not and will continue to not come easily. We explain here that there has been and may continue to be an element of permanence of racism in our society and the Black Belt. We acknowledge our solutions are the beginning of ideas that will require much more planning and brainstorming, and that remnants of racial oppression will linger for generations. While complete removal of systemic racism is unlikely, we can and must mitigate its effects. And, of course, we must urgently continue this work because the struggles of schoolchildren in the Alabama Black Belt continue to happen at this very moment. It is now on our generation to decide if the promise of “segregation forever” will be broken.

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