

Socioeconomic Segregation of African Americans: Academic Achievement and Psychological Well-being

Abstract

This article analyzes the enduring effect of socioeconomic segregation on African Americans in America, particularly on school success and psychological well-being. Based on the recent research, it highlights how modern and traditional segregation results in under-funded schools, achievement gaps, and increased psychological tension due to chronic exposure to challenge and bias. The research further identifies resilience sources, such as robust community bonds and supportive institutions, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The paper ends by emphasizing the necessity for wide-ranging policy reforms and community-based initiatives to address the institutional barriers that reinforce segregation and its negative consequences.

Keywords: Socioeconomic segregation, African Americans, academic achievement, psychological well-being.

1 Introduction

Socioeconomic segregation is a chronic and persistent feature of the American cityscape, with implications that echo through virtually all aspects of life for African Americans. Despite the progress achieved since the Civil Rights Movement, African American neighborhoods remain disproportionately isolated in poor communities with failing schools and limited access to essential services. This spatial and social segregation is not merely a matter of geography; it is an expression of centuries of structural inequities that have been perpetuated through discriminatory policies and practices (Reardon et al., 2022). The long-term impacts of such segregation are felt way beyond the neighborhood boundaries, influencing academic achievement and mental well-being for generations. This article examines the processes through which socioeconomic segregation affects African Americans, utilizing recent empirical studies to illuminate the interconnected nature of place, opportunity, and well-being.

2 Socioeconomic Segregation of African Americans

2.1 Background and Theoretical Framework

Socioeconomic segregation refers to the spatial separation of groups by income, education, and job, which in a large number of instances is congruent with race due to historical and ongoing institutional discrimination. African Americans' roots are deeply placed in the history of America. Redlining, exclusionary zoning, and discriminatory lending have systematically constrained access to wealth accumulation opportunities and quality resources (Rothstein, 2017; Reardon et al., 2022). Redlining involved denying loans and mortgages to individuals residing in predominantly Black areas, closing off generations of African Americans from ownership and the

consequent capital accumulation. Theoretical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory and the Social Determinants of Health model, provide useful insights into how these structural factors continue to deepen disadvantage. Critical Race Theory emphasizes institutional racism's activity in maintaining inequalities, arguing that racism extends beyond individual prejudice to laws, policies, and practices that have an ongoing, systematic impact on derogating people of color (Williams et al., 2019). The Social Determinants of Health model highlights how environmental determinants, such as neighbourhood conditions, access to education, and economic opportunities, influence life outcomes, including health and well-being.

2.2 Current State of Socioeconomic Segregation

Despite the formal abolition of legal segregation, contemporary American cities remain highly segregated by race as well as class. Contemporary analyses locate that African Americans are most likely to reside in poverty areas, where over 40% of the population subsists below the federal poverty line (Reardon et al., 2022). These poverty areas are lacking in high-performing schools, safe public spaces, and high-quality healthcare. The persistence of segregation is also compounded by ongoing processes such as gentrification and predatory lending that displace long-term residents and undermine community cohesion (Thyden et al., 2023). Work conducted by Reardon and colleagues (2022) demonstrates that segregation in schools is inseparable from residential segregation, with Black students disproportionately attending schools where the majority of students are also Black and economically disadvantaged. This double segregation limits exposure to heterogeneous social networks and reduces access to economic and educational opportunities. It creates an unevenness cycle that is difficult to reverse without conscious policy intervention. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted and exacerbated these imbalances. African American communities, who were more likely to reside in segregated and under-resourced neighborhoods, faced higher rates of infection, mortality, and economic hardship during the pandemic, calling attention to the intersection of health, place, and race (Williams et al., 2021).

2.3 Socioeconomic Segregation and Academic Achievement

One of the strongest impacts of socioeconomic segregation is the wildly uneven distribution of educational resources across high-poverty, predominantly Black and predominantly White schools. Segregated, high-poverty schools receive significantly less funding, often due to local property tax-based funding formulas that penalize lower-valued neighbourhoods (Reardon et al., 2022). This underfunding results in larger class sizes, outdated textbooks, fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, and fewer chances to take more challenging courses, such as Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Black students are 3.6 times as likely as White students to be attending schools where more than 75% of the students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, a common measure of poverty (Reardon et al., 2022). These schools also experience higher teacher turnover rates, in excess of 30% annually, compared to 10% for schools with predominantly White students (Anderson et al., 2022). Large-scale turnover undermines

instructional continuity and results in a less experienced teaching staff. The lack of stability and continuity among the teaching staff can have significant effects on students' learning and motivation. The effects of these inequities are evident in persistent achievement gaps. Across the country, Black students consistently score lower on tests and are less likely to earn a high school degree or attend college compared to their White peers. Reardon et al. (2022) found that segregation by race accounts for 45% of the Black-White achievement gap in third-grade mathematics and reading scores. By eighth grade, the gap widens further in racially segregated districts due to chronic educational disadvantage and increased trauma exposure (Anderson et al., 2022). Moreover, denying access to rigorous academic courses and enrichment opportunities limits the development of key skills necessary for college and career success. Black students in racially segregated schools are less likely to have access to science labs, art classes, and technology tools, all of which are required for an educationally well-rounded education. Not only does the limited access imply shorter opportunities for academic success, but it also limits students' aspirations and opportunities for upward mobility.

Socioeconomic segregation also affects school climate. Black students in segregated schools are more likely to be given punitive discipline, such as suspensions and expulsions, for the same misbehaviors as their White peers. These exclusionary types of discipline contribute to the "school-to-prison pipeline," making them more likely to enter the criminal justice system (Anderson et al., 2022). The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2021) also reported that 15% of the students were Black, but 39% were suspended. These kinds of discipline differences not only remove students from valuable instructional time but also generate feelings of alienation and mistrust of schools. Negative school climates, characterized by high rates of discipline and low rates of support, can be potentially harmful to students' sense of belonging and motivation, as well as pose additional obstacles to academic performance. Students who are connected are known to perform better academically and are less likely to engage in high-risk behaviours (Davis et al., 2024). Despite such challenges, there are protective processes that can cushion the negative effects of segregation. For example, attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) has been shown to support academic perseverance and psychological resilience for Black students. HBCU alumni have 24% fewer depressive symptoms and stronger racial identity compared to students at predominantly White institutions (Thyden et al., 2023; Davis et al., 2024). The supportive settings of HBCUs, where students are among peers and with instructors who share similar backgrounds and life experiences, act to counteract the negative effects of prior educational disadvantage.

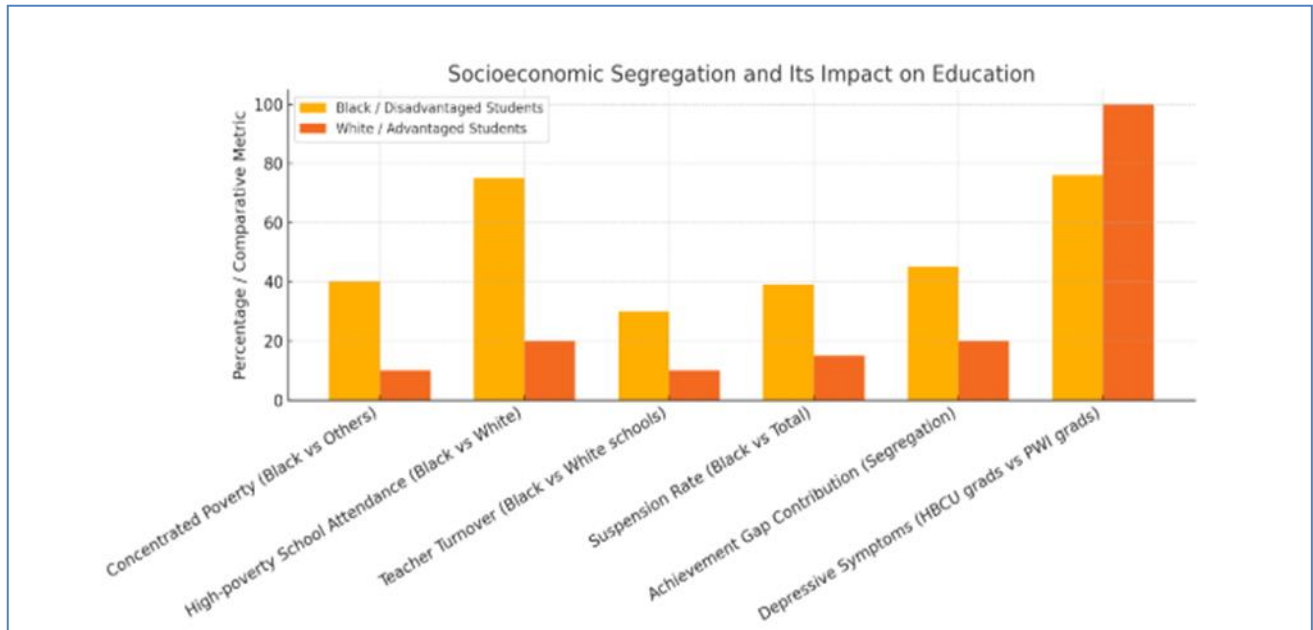


Fig 1 Socioeconomic Segregation and Its Impact on Education: Adapted from data and findings reported between 2021 and 2024 by Reardon et al. (2022), Anderson et al. (2022), Thyden et al. (2023), Davis et al. (2024), and the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2021).

2.4 Socioeconomic Segregation and Psychological Well-being

Living in racially isolated, high-poverty communities exposes African Americans to chronic stressors that wear down psychological well-being. The stressors are exposure to violence, exposure to toxins in the environment, food insecurity, and limited access to mental health care. The joint effect of these adversities is captured by the "weathering hypothesis," which posits that chronic stress resulting from social and economic hardships accelerates the deterioration of health among African Americans (Thyden et al., 2023). Recent studies indicate that Black teens in very segregated schools have 40% greater risks of developing behavioral problems and early drug abuse due to the aggressive school environment and stress from violence in communities (Anderson et al., 2022). College-educated Black Americans have 68% chances to regularly suffer from racial micro-aggressions with a 1.5 times higher risk of clinical depression (Brown et al., 2023). Chronic stress not only affects mental health but also physical health inequities, including a higher prevalence of hypertension, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. Socioeconomic segregation also feeds the psychological toll of racism. Anticipating and encountering discrimination—inside schools, workplaces, and public spaces—generates what has been called "vigilance burden," a condition of hyper-vigilance that saps cognitive and affective resources. This burden has been shown to reduce the academic achievement gap by 12% and symptoms of burnout by 19% (Davis et al., 2024). Second, when people are required to "code-switch"—or change their behavior and language to fit largely White contexts—they are at risk of becoming emotionally exhausted and isolated. But high racial identity and social support can also serve as buffers, reducing the incidence of depression by 33% and anxiety by 22% (Davis et al., 2024).

Confirmation of cultural identity and identification with community norms has been found to promote resilience and a sense of meaning, even in the face of adversity. African American communities remain resilient in the face of the insurmountable challenges of segregation. Religious communities, social networks, and cultural institutions are invaluable in providing emotional support, a sense of belonging, and advocacy for social justice. Such community resources cannot be replaced in promoting psychological health and group recovery. For example, participation in church activities and community groups has been identified as correlated with decreased depression and increased life satisfaction among African Americans (Davis et al., 2024).

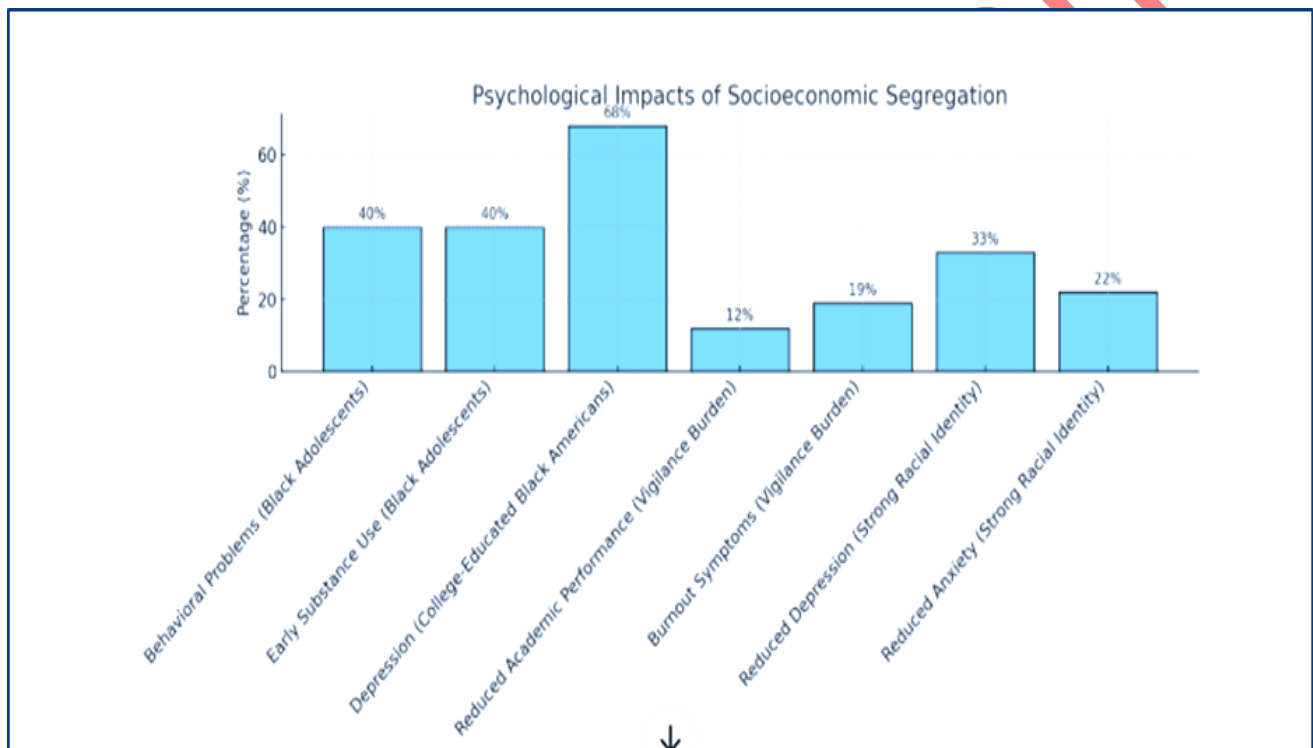


Fig 2 Psychological Impacts of Socioeconomic Segregation: Adapted from studies conducted between 2022 and 2024 by Thyden et al., Anderson et al., Brown et al., and Davis et al.

2.5 Discussion

The interaction between socioeconomic segregation, education, and mental health is intricate and multifaceted. Segregation not only confines economic opportunities but also shapes social environments in ways that perpetuate disadvantage. The synergy between educational disparities and chronic stress drives intergenerational poverty and ill health. However, the existence of protective factors, such as strong racial identity, positive school climates, and community cohesion, highlights the resilience and strength for adaptation. Ending segregation at its root requires a comprehensive solution that synchronizes policy reform with grassroots

empowerment. Targeting individual symptoms is not enough; overall change is necessary to dismantle the pillars of discrimination.

3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

To bridge learning disparities, policymakers must invest in equitable funding frameworks that allocate funds based on student need rather than local property values (Reardon et al., 2022). Culturally responsive curriculum and teacher preparation can enhance school climate and support academic success. Expanding funding for HBCUs and other minority-serving institutions is also crucial in creating resilience and achievement for Black students (Thyden et al., 2023). Increasing the availability of mental health services to remote communities is a vital component. This includes financing school wellness centers, educating teachers on trauma-informed skills, and expanding access to culturally responsive mental health professionals (Davis et al., 2024). Disciplinary inequalities can be lessened with anti-bias training for staff and teachers. Expanding community-based mental health programs, such as peer support and culturally tailored interventions, is also required. Interventions for reversing residential segregation would include enforcing equitable housing laws, expanding the supply of affordable housing, and providing mobility support to families who wish to move to areas of greater opportunity. Anti-gentrification and predatory lending policies are also critical in ensuring community stability (Reardon et al., 2022). Integrating affordable housing with quality schools, access to healthcare, and job opportunities is critical in breaking the cycle of segregation. Empowering African American populations with the ability to participate in decision-making processes for education, housing, and health is crucial. Community-led initiatives that leverage local assets and address specific community needs can be more effective and sustainable. Supporting grassroots organizations and facilitating collaboration among community groups and policymakers can ensure that interventions are culturally relevant and responsive.

4 Conclusion

Socioeconomic segregation remains a powerful predictor of schooling and psychological achievement for African Americans. Structural racism remains a factor in shaping the distribution of resources and opportunities, thereby contributing to ongoing disparities in education and mental health. Alleviating these disparities will require a multimodal approach that combines policy reform, investment in community, and magnification of protective cultural resources. By prioritizing equity and justice in policy and practice, settings can be established where African Americans can thrive academically and psychologically.

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