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The Cost of Segregation || Part 2: Paying for Preferences

Debating the cost

Author: Don't blame social ills on segregation

By The Detroit News

When *America in Black and White: One Nation, Indivisible* appeared in 1997, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom were hailed, even by their critics, as important observers of race in America. The book's controversial thesis: Race relations are improving and the negatives are largely overstated. Stephan Thernstrom, a history professor at Harvard University, talked to The News. Excerpts:



Thernstrom

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Q: You argue that the decreases we've seen in segregation haven't gotten the attention they deserve. Why?

A: From what I've seen ... the trend toward greater integration that began in the 1960s has continued right down through 2000. Indeed, now our neighborhoods have the lowest levels of segregation they've had since 1920. ... That's very good news.

Q: Many researchers have argued segregation has a host of harmful effects; do they overstate those effects?

A: It is too simple-minded to say that to the extent that every racial or ethnic group is not evenly distributed across the land, that's bad. If you look at any major city with a large Jewish population, guess what? The Jews are not evenly distributed. A lot of Jews prefer to live with other Jews. So there's a great contradiction: Most people recognize that groups naturally show some tendency to congregate, and think of that as a good thing, part of the American mosaic. They see that with blacks and say, "Oh, what horrible racism."

Q: You disagree with those who argue that segregation is partly to blame for social problems in black neighborhoods?

A: I certainly do disagree. There are neighborhoods in Detroit where

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poverty rates are very high, there are many female-headed households without fathers, a lot of crime -- social pathology of all sorts. The notion that if you could pick them up and scatter them into high-income suburbs, that that would have major positive effects -- that I'm very doubtful of. Living in a well-to-do suburb if you don't have a job doesn't have obvious benefits.

Q:How much merit do you see in that argument that sprawl is a negative consequence of segregation?

A:Implicit in many of those arguments is belief in some kind of metropolitan government, to control land use. ... But remember, the enormous drive toward residential dispersion of African Americans has been in the parts of the country most resistant to central social planning, the South and the West. This process of integration is happening because of the free market, not because of government regulations.

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