

PRELIMINARY

The Civil Rights Movement and Educational Inequality

Excerpted from the planned manuscript *The Dream and the Rust: Evaluating the Civil Rights Movement in the Context of Industrial Decline*

Jacob L. Vigdor

Duke University and NBER

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Black-white earnings inequality, analyzed in chapter 5, to some extent reflects black-white inequality in educational outcomes. Basic labor economics tells us that the earnings of any worker are tied to the value that worker generates for her employer. This value, in turn, depends on the worker's skills, which are imparted largely but not entirely via formal education.

By any of several measures, racial inequality in educational outcomes has long been a feature of American society. In the midst of Reconstruction, the 1880 Census recorded an illiteracy rate of 76.2% for black Southerners over the age of 10, compared to 21.5% in the white population.¹ While literacy rates have improved to the point where the Census Bureau no longer bothers to measure them, inequality in educational outcomes is today measured by test score gaps or differences in years of schooling completed. By either measure, the most recent generations of black and non-Hispanic white youth have exhibited continued inequality of outcomes.

Educational outcomes are a function of numerous factors, which can be roughly divided into three categories. Some portion of inequality in outcomes can be attributed to the circumstances of a child's birth. The earliest stage of the learning process occurs primarily at home in the context of a family, and families differ in their capacity to invest in their child's early development. A second portion of variation in outcomes can be attributed to individual choices. As they mature, students have increased opportunities to determine the duration and content of their education. The final set of factors represents educational opportunity. At the point where students – or their parents acting on their behalf – made decisions about their education, what options were available to them? For purposes of either studying or addressing black-white inequality in educational outcomes, racial disparities in these educational opportunities are of paramount importance.

¹ Margo (1990) p.7.

As was the case for earnings inequality, the evidence on racial disparities in either educational opportunities or outcomes shows significant improvement over the long run, with some worries regarding very recent and future trajectories. Although attributing a specific portion of this progress to the Civil Rights Movement is complicated by the fact that trends toward greater equality appear long before the 1960s, the best evidence indicates that specific actions – the integration of public schools and universities, school finance reforms that brought more resources into poor communities, and emphasis on the performance of disadvantaged students embedded in the Federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 – made a tangible difference. Just as racial progress towards earnings parity becomes more evident once we account for the general increase in economic inequality since the 1960s, this educational progress has occurred in an environment where economic inequality in educational outcomes has increased.

As encouraging as the track record in narrowing educational disparities has been, future prospects are widely considered uncertain. Efforts to actively integrate public schools have declined in recent years, largely because of court decisions. School funding, though distributed more equitably than in the past, is under threat from basic budgetary pressure in many states. As postsecondary education comes to be viewed as essential to success in a postindustrial economy, racial gaps in college completion have proved stubborn. Assessing the importance of these adverse trends is a complicated task. As much as educational disparities have lessened through the years, our understanding of how best to invest resources to foster adequacy and equity of educational opportunity remains far from complete.

Policy background

As noted above, there were sharp disparities in literacy rates between blacks and whites in the Reconstruction era. At any given time, the educational outcomes of the adult population largely reflect opportunities available in earlier years, and educational outcomes for enslaved African-Americans were few and far between. While the 14th amendment to the Constitution guaranteed newly freed slaves equal protection under law, the oversight of this equal protection in the realm of education was largely delegated to the states. The Constitution makes no mention of public education, thus reserving the power to organize and support schools to state and local governments. In the wake of the Civil War, Southern states chose to face the task of organizing schools for black children by establishing legally separate systems.

Although Southern states operated officially segregated schools for a century following the conclusion of the Civil War, opportunities in the late 19th century were distributed more equally than the period before or after, a direct consequence of Reconstruction-era regimes. Per-pupil spending on teacher salaries in black schools effectively equaled that in white schools in Alabama and North Carolina as of 1890.² At the time of the 1898 Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, one could point to these statistics in support of the argument that the operation of separate but equal schools constituted equal, or nearly equal, opportunity.

The equality of opportunity in the Reconstruction era can be debated, but data on school attendance rates point to significant disparities in educational outcomes. Fewer than half of black males between the ages of 10 and 14 were enrolled in school as of 1890, compared to nearly 80% of white males.³

Within 20 years, any pretense of equality of opportunity for Southern blacks and whites had vanished. Per pupil spending in North Carolina's black schools had declined to 54% of that

² Margo (1986).

³ Margo (1990).

in white schools; the ratio reached as low as 17% in Louisiana. Louisiana's white schools held class an average of 153 days per year; black schools averaged less than half that.⁴ Black schools in Florida and Mississippi had average class sizes more than twice those in white schools – South Carolina's black classrooms averaged over 49 students each.

From this low point in the early 20th century, disparities between black and white schools in the South lessened. By 1950, the length of the school year had been equalized in several states.⁵ Per pupil spending disparities eased; Louisiana went from spending 17 cents on the dollar in black schools to 62 cents.⁶ Class sizes in black schools fell – by nearly half in South Carolina.⁷ Perhaps reflecting this improved investment in black schools, the black-white gap in school attendance among 10-14 year old males, over 30 percentage points in 1910, had declined to exactly zero by 1950.⁸

These improvements may seem marginal in some respects, but they have been associated with significant improvements in the relative standing of African-American adults in the labor market. Taking advantage of the fact that not all states improved black school quality on the same timetable, labor economists David Card and Alan Krueger estimate that innovations such as a longer school year and higher per-pupil spending account for some 20% of the relative improvements in black labor market earnings between 1960 and 1980.

The Supreme Court's overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 promised to further eradicate black-white disparities in educational opportunity. In fact, very few Southern communities took any steps to move away from operating separate school

⁴ Margo (1986).

⁵ U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (1954).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Margo (1990).

districts for black and white children in the wake of the decision.⁹ Those that did, including the dramatic case of Little Rock, Arkansas, where Central High School was integrated in 1957, often were under the direct threat of Federal military intervention. Although the Supreme Court had ruled separate school systems a violation of African-Americans' constitutional rights, the delegation of responsibility for operating public schools to the states, coupled with the unwillingness of state officials to act, offered the Federal government relatively little chance to enforce its mandate broadly.¹⁰

The true decline and fall of legally separated school systems occurred more than a decade later, in the wake of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1964. The ESEA created several forms of Federal financial support for schools, notably the Title I program for assisting schools serving economically disadvantaged students. The ESEA stipulated that Federal assistance was not available in communities operating dual school systems for white and black students. In the wake of this legislation, Southern school districts – particularly those who stood to gain more from the infusion of Federal dollars – took action.¹¹ Financial incentives had accomplished what court rulings could not.

In the post-ESEA South, and in the remainder of the country, the absence of school assignment rules based on race did not always imply that black and white children experienced racial diversity in their classrooms. Students typically attended schools in their neighborhood; to the extent that neighborhoods in their community were segregated, so were the schools. Between the late 1960s and early 1970s, a series of lawsuits challenged this pattern – *de facto* rather than *de jure* segregation. The associated court decisions required many districts to take further action to integrate their schools, rather than merely permit any student to attend their

⁹ Clotfelter (2006).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cascio et al. (2010).

neighborhood school. These actions took the form of busing, a practice whereby student assignments to schools are based not solely on neighborhood, but also with the goal of ensuring that all schools in a district had roughly comparable racial composition.

Even this action did not ensure the integration of all schools in a community. Small, homogeneous suburban school districts adjacent to large, diverse cities were never required to participate in integration plans. Court-ordered busing led to violence and strife in working-class white neighborhoods in cities like Boston, and may have contributed to the phenomenon of “white flight.” The tendency for white families to exit racially mixed communities predates the busing era by several decades, but the decade of the 1970s witnessed dramatic population declines in many large, racially heterogeneous cities.

The spate of cases challenging the use of neighborhood schools in segregated cities was followed by a series of legislative and judicial initiatives to change the manner of funding public education. The traditional model for funding primary and secondary schools in the United States relied on locally raised sources, predominantly property taxes. The reliance on local revenue meant that students attending schools in poor districts often witnessed lower levels of per-pupil spending, a pattern that was challenged as unconstitutional in some states and addressed through law changes in others. In most cases, the effect of these initiatives was to move away from local-source funding and towards a model where state government either directly provided a larger share of funds or played a role in redistributing funds from wealthy to poor districts.

School finance equalizations, as these initiatives have been termed, undoubtedly reduce funding inequities across poor and rich jurisdictions in a state. There has been considerable debate, however, regarding the effectiveness of these equalizations in improving educational

opportunity in poor jurisdictions.¹² California's equalization plan, enacted in the wake of the *Serrano v. Priest* case in 1975, effectively required local school districts to send 100% of their local property tax revenue to the state to be apportioned on an equal basis statewide. Shortly thereafter, California voters approved Proposition 13, which drastically cut property tax collections. In a regime where voters could not be assured that their locally-raised dollars were spent locally, they may have rationally chosen to raise fewer of them.¹³

At the same time these trends toward integration and equalized funding of primary and secondary schools occurred, *de jure* segregation in public higher education declined as well. Images of the first African-American students at Central High School in Little Rock are often joined with those of James Meredith, the student who integrated the University of Alabama over the vociferous opposition of George Wallace. Calls to desegregate institutions of higher education in the 1960s were soon followed by calls to implement affirmative action in selective college admissions – supported by the Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*.

The past twenty years have witnessed the reversal of many of the initiatives designed to address inequities in educational opportunity. Lawsuits brought by white students in Federal court have challenged the use of racial preferences in both K-12 and higher education, with recent rulings placing severe restrictions on, if not outright eliminating, busing to achieve balance within public school districts and affirmative action in college admissions.¹⁴ In several states, voters have taken action to curtail the use of race in college admissions with ballot initiatives.

¹² Hoxby (2001).

¹³ Fischel (1989).

¹⁴ For cases challenging racial preferences and busing, see *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* for K-12, and *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Fisher v. University of Texas* for higher education.

The reversal of efforts to afford black students extraordinary opportunities to enroll in predominantly white educational institutions have had predictable effects, in most cases. The representation of African-American students on selective public college campuses affected by affirmative action bans has declined.¹⁵ Trends in K-12 school segregation are somewhat more complicated. The relaxation of school integration efforts, permitting districts to revert to neighborhood-based schools, has been offset to some extent by the pattern of increased neighborhood integration shown in Chapter 6. The rapid growth of the Hispanic and Asian populations has changed the nature of school segregation as well. Black students are exposed to an increasing proportion of nonwhite classmates, but this increase is driven almost entirely by non-black non-whites. White students, as well, have witnessed increases in the proportion of Hispanic and Asian classmates. The goal of integration efforts has traditionally been to introduce more African-American students into predominantly white schools. The question of whether multicultural schools are acceptable substitutes for predominantly white schools is controversial and complicated.

While these movements have undone some earlier changes, additional policies and movements have sought to address continued inequality of educational opportunities and outcomes. Inspired by the writings of economist Milton Friedman in the 1960s, many observers attribute inequality to a lack of school choice for poor families. Basic economics suggests that producers, including schools, have better incentives to produce higher quality goods (in this case, students) when they face the threat of losing customers (parents) to competitors (other schools). Affluent parents, it is argued, can naturally comparison shop for schools. They possess the resources to pay private school tuition, or to buy a house in exclusive neighborhoods served by generously funded public schools. Poor parents may lack the ability to do either. To those who

¹⁵ Hinrichs (2012).

support this diagnosis, the proposed remedy consists of introducing competition – to allow poor families to enjoy more choice opportunities. The school choice movement has spawned voucher programs, which allow families to use public funds to pay private tuition, charter schools which operate independently of local school districts while receiving public support, and choice programs within public school districts.

A belief in the power of school choice to improve equity of educational opportunity infused the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, which sought to focus public schools' attention on improving the quality of education afforded to lower-performing students. Public schools were required to report student achievement data, and were subjected to an escalating series of sanctions in the event the proportion of students attaining certain key benchmarks – proficiency, in the language of the act – fell below critical thresholds. The first sanction in the regime required schools to offer their students free transfers to better-performing public schools.

The history of racial inequity in access to educational opportunity is marked by broad, decades-long trends punctuated by occasional discrete interventions. This poses severe methodological challenges for any effort to infer the impact of the Civil Rights Movement. The essential counterfactual – what would have happened had a specific event not occurred – is harder to contemplate when there is no one specific event to analyze, but rather a chain of events and trends linked together over 80 years or more. As we will see below, researchers have responded to this challenge largely by focusing their efforts in two directions: examining long-run trends in educational disparities and the short-run impacts of discrete events. Both strands of research point toward the conclusion that the changes brought about by advocates for more equal opportunity in education have translated into more equal outcomes in education. At the same

time the evidence clearly indicates that significant disparities remain, and the prospects for further eroding them are difficult to discern in light of more recent policy trends.

The scope for policy to influence educational disparities

How do educational opportunities translate into educational outcomes? Economists have long likened education to a production process. Just as a factory collects raw materials and workers to produce a finished product, schools collect children and resources – both physical and human – to produce educated adults. Educational opportunity can be thought of as encompassing the quantity and quality of resources made available to any one child as he or she progresses through the formal education system, from preschool to graduate school.

Along some dimensions, it is fairly clear that inequity of resources translates directly into inequality of opportunity. As noted above, in the first half of the 20th century black children experienced a significantly shorter school year than whites – in some areas, the disparity was as high as a factor of two. The intuitive notion that shorter school years constitute an inferior educational opportunity has been born out in numerous academic studies.¹⁶ The closing of the instructional time gap, which occurred in most Southern states prior to the Brown v. Board decision, thus represents a clear educational opportunity.

Along other dimensions, the story is significantly more complicated. Should students of all races have equal opportunities to learn in classrooms taught by a black teacher? In a world where all schools and classrooms were racially integrated – every class a microcosm of the American student population – all students would have an equal chance of learning from a teacher of any given race. At least one study has documented, however, that students tend to perform better on standardized assessments when they are randomly assigned to a teacher of

¹⁶ Pischke (2007), Hansen (2008), Card and Krueger (1992)

their own race.¹⁷ The performance of African-American students, for example, tends to improve when they are assigned to an African-American teacher. How ought we define equality of opportunity in this case? Equality of the opportunity to learn from a white, black, Asian, or Hispanic teacher? Or equality of the opportunity to learn from a teacher of your own race? Given findings in the literature, moving from the latter definition of opportunity to the former would carry significant implications for the degree of equality in educational outcomes.

In the busing era, public policy effectively placed a high priority on the opportunity to have access to the resources available in schools serving whiter neighborhoods. To pursue this opportunity, however, policy makers had to introduce inequality in the opportunity to attend a school close to home. In many school districts, integration was accomplished by assigning African-American students to schools in distant neighborhoods, regardless of their personal preference. For reasons of political expediency, however, white students were typically not assigned to schools in black neighborhoods without their consent. Instead, districts frequently operated magnet programs or other choice options in those schools to attract white students voluntarily. Does this constitute equal opportunity?

Determining whether the educational system has offered students equal opportunities is further complicated by the fact that students entering the system already exhibit significant disparities in academic measures such as standardized assessments.¹⁸ The black-white test score gap, in other words, is apparent on the first day of kindergarten. It is thus difficult to assess whether opportunities have been equalized by simply assessing the degree of disparity upon exit from the system. The disparities evident in early childhood also indicate that a school system that truly offers equal opportunities – exposing children to the exact same curriculum, the same

¹⁷ Dee (2004).

¹⁸ Fryer and Levitt (2004).

instructional style, and the same pacing – might in fact exacerbate inequality rather than reduce it.

For example, many states and school districts have embraced efforts to equalize the timing of introductory Algebra instruction for all students. In general, the timing of Algebra varies considerably, with advanced students taking the course in 8th grade or earlier, moderately-performing students taking the course in high school, and some lower-performing students never taking it at all. When two large North Carolina school districts made efforts to accelerate entry into introductory Algebra around 2002, the net result was to widen, rather than reduce, inequality by some important measures.¹⁹ Relative to students with similar past mathematics test scores who waited to take the course, the accelerated students scored significantly worse on a standardized end-of-course exam and were less likely to pass a follow-up course in Geometry. Pursuing equality along one dimension – Algebra timing – in fact exacerbated inequality along another dimension.

Given the inequality of starting points, then, the pursuit of equality in final outcomes requires the school system to present unequal opportunities to students. Moreover, the state of knowledge regarding which particular opportunities are most critical for attaining certain outcomes is far from complete. In which cases should the education system pursue equality? In which cases inequality? These are complicated questions. The failure of the education system to eradicate racial disparities in educational outcomes should thus not be construed as a reason to condemn the system. Rather, it reflects the fundamental difficulty of the task and our imperfect understanding, even after more than a century of progress and experimentation, of how to accomplish it.

¹⁹ Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2015).

The quest for equality in educational outcomes resembles a journey where one knows the destination but is unsure how to get there, or even which direction is the right way to set off. It is clear, however, that we have traveled some distance with the goal of reaching that destination. The remainder of this chapter seeks to assess exactly what we've accomplished in our peregrinations to this point.

The test score gap

There are two common measures of educational outcomes: attainment, the number of years of school an individual completes, and standardized tests, which attempt to measure the amount of learning an individual has accomplished in those years of schooling. This chapter considers equality along the second dimension first.

Over the long run, the black-white test score gap has declined. This trend is evident in Figure 1, drawn from the work of sociologist Sean Reardon.²⁰ The disparity in test scores among black and white students born in the early 1940s, and thus educated primarily in the period before *Brown v. Board* and entirely before wholesale integration began in the mid-1960s, is approximately twice to three times the size of the gap measured in birth cohorts since 1990. Progress in closing the gap was most rapid among the cohorts born between the 1940s and the early 1970s. By some measures, particularly scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test administered to a representative sample of American students at regular intervals since the 1970s, progress stalled between the birth cohorts of the late 1970s and early 1990s. Among the most recent cohorts, there is evidence of renewed progress, albeit at a relatively slow pace.

²⁰ Reardon (2011).

The narrowing of the black-white test score gap has occurred in the context of widening socioeconomic test score inequality. Children of affluent parents have long attained higher average scores on standardized assessments. The socioeconomic gap may reflect the spoils of affluence itself: wealthy parents can afford to spend more on their children's education. It might also reflect the inheritance of traits that led parents to be wealthy themselves. Regardless of whether the socioeconomic gap reflects nature or nurture, evidence clearly indicates that the disparity has widened over time. In the most recent age cohorts, the difference in average test scores between students whose family income placed at the 90th percentile and those at the 10th percentile, as shown in Reardon's graph, is perhaps 50% larger than it was a generation ago. Given the degree of black-white income inequality revealed in the preceding chapter, the widening income gap suggests that it would have been reasonable to expect a concomitant widening of the black-white test score gap. Just as the widening income gap makes the modest evidence of closure in the black-white earnings gap more impressive, the narrowing of the black-white gap appears more remarkable in the context of widening test score gaps between the rich and poor.

Studies of the test score gap have commonly focused on the difference in average test scores between black and white students. While it is hard to imagine a better single summary measure of the disparity in educational achievement at any point in time, as was the case in our analysis of earnings the study of averages can obscure important variation in experiences. Unlike the case with earnings, where a steady average disparity masked a divergence of fortunes between advantaged and disadvantaged blacks, evidence suggests that the educational advancement of African-Americans relative to whites has been widespread.

The Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics has conducted two National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth over the past 35 years. In 1979, the NLSY sampled a group of youth age 14-21, born between 1958 and 1965. These students would have attended public school in the early years of the integrated era. The second sample, recruited 18 years later, consisted of youth born between 1981 and 1985. Students belonging to these cohorts would have witnessed school integration at or near its peak, before court decisions began to erode efforts to achieve racial balance in schools.

The youth recruited in both cohorts were administered a battery of standardized tests, developed by the United States military to assess prospective enlistees. These tests provide a snapshot of the takers' academic achievement in adolescence.

Figure 2 presents cumulative density functions for the ASVAB percentile scores of non-Hispanic white and black students in the 1979 NLSY cohort. These plots can be interpreted similarly to the plots for earnings in the preceding chapter. At any given point along the horizontal axis, the height of the black and white curves indicates the proportion of the relevant population that scored at or below that level.

The degree of disparity in ASVAB scores is stark. About 42% of non-Hispanic white respondents receive scores below the 50th percentile; the proportion of black respondents with scores below this level is more than twice as high. Thirty percent of black respondents post scores below the 10th percentile; about 19 black students out of 20 fall below the 80th percentile. Black students, in short, are vastly overrepresented at the low end of the test score distribution and underrepresented at the high end. The median black student obtains a test score that would place him or her in the bottom 10 percent of the white distribution.

Figure 3 shows that among students educated two decades later, racial disparities in test scores remain stark, although a close examination of the evidence reveals progress for blacks relative to whites. The proportion of black students scoring below the 50th percentile has fallen from nearly 90% to just under 80%. The proportion falling below the 10th and 80th percentiles are lower as well. The median black student obtains a score that would place him or her around the 15th percentile of the white distribution. These are incremental changes, to be sure, but they do constitute progress.

Consistent with Sean Reardon's work, the NLSY samples show a widening of the gap in test scores between economically advantaged and disadvantaged youth over two decades. Figure 4 divides the 1979 cohort into four equal-sized groups on the basis of family income, as recorded in the initial survey interview. Respondents raised in the poorest quarter of sampled families underperform relative to their wealthier counterparts. The median poor student receives a test score that outperforms only 16 percent of students from the highest-income group, 27 percent of students from the next-highest income group, and 38 percent of the third-highest income group.

Figure 5 shows the same chart, drawn using respondents from the 1997 sample. Here, there is a noticeable increase in spread across categories; poor students have lost ground relative to all other groups. The median poor student now outperforms only 30 percent of students in the next highest income category.

Across both samples, African-American youth are significantly more likely to be drawn from the lower income categories. For this reason, we would expect black-white test score inequality to have increased between the 1979 and 1997 cohorts. If every student earned a test score on the basis of their income quartile, the widening income divide forecasts that the black-

white gap would have increased by 1.2 percentile points between the two cohorts. In fact, the size of the gap fell by 4.3 percentile points.

Although the decline in the black-white test score gap appears more remarkable in light of the forecasted widening based on income, it should be emphasized that the gap remains large. The average black respondent in the NLSY97 scored 26.5 percentile points below her white counterpart on the ASVAB test. Moreover, longer-run evidence indicates that comparing these two birth cohorts will lead us to infer a relatively rapid rate of progress in closing the gap. According to the NAEP data, the black-white gap among students born a decade after the NLSY97 cohort was just as large, if not larger, than the gap in that cohort itself.

To what extent can we attribute the long-run decline in the black-white test score gap to actions explicitly taken to address inequity in educational opportunity? The circumstantial evidence is compelling enough: cohorts that attended integrated schools exhibited a much smaller gap than those educated in *de jure* segregated schools. Moreover, the “stall” in the gap exhibited among cohorts born after the NLSY97 cohort coincides with a break in the long-run trend in school segregation. The more recent resumption in narrowing the gap would appear to coincide with the emphasis on improving the performance of disadvantaged students brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act.

As compelling as the circumstantial evidence may be, more sophisticated efforts to attribute relative test score improvements among African-Americans to school desegregation and other policy interventions are remarkably less clear-cut. Were educational policies and practices effective in narrowing the gap, we might expect the black-white test score gap to narrow as children progress through school. In fact, evidence points in the other direction. Numerous studies document a widening of the black-white test score gap in the early elementary grades,

followed by stasis through at least the middle school years.²¹ It may be fair to give schools credit for not allowing the gap to widen even more than it does, but the evidence does not support the notion that schools effectively counteract the inequalities that accrue during early childhood.

One might expect the test score performance of African-American students to decline in districts that cease their efforts to bus students for purposes of racial integration. In one large district forced to stop busing by court order, North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, evidence suggests that the test scores of African-Americans if anything improved.²²

In the 1990s, a Federal demonstration program encouraged predominantly black and Hispanic residents of high-poverty neighborhoods to move to lower-poverty neighborhoods. Evaluations of the impact of this mobility on student test scores consistently reveal no significant effect.²³ While these studies suggest that changing both schools and neighborhoods is no guarantee of improved educational opportunity, two other studies suggest otherwise. In an analysis of student performance on college entrance exams, David Card and Jesse Rothstein infer that students raised in more integrated neighborhoods exhibit smaller test score gaps.²⁴ Their study further suggests that school integration achieved by busing, rather than by neighborhood integration, has little if any further effect.

A more recent study by Heather Schwartz analyzes residents placed into public housing units in Montgomery County, Maryland. Families on the waiting list for public housing units must take the first unit available when they reach the top of the list, and these units are scattered through a variety of more- and less-affluent portions of the county. Schwartz finds that children

²¹ Fryer and Levitt (2004), Clotfelter, Ladd and Vigdor (2009).

²² Vigdor (2011).

²³ Vigdor and Ludwig (2008).

²⁴ Card and Rothstein (2007).

in families assigned to units in more affluent parts of the county perform significantly better in school, an effect that compounds as the family spends more time in the neighborhood.²⁵

How might we reconcile these disparate findings and the circumstantial evidence? One hypothesis consistent with most results could be stated as follows. The *de jure* segregation practiced by Southern states prior to the integration brought about by Civil Rights-era legislation was harmful to African-American students. Although states worked to lessen resource disparities between the dual school systems in the era leading up to *Brown v. Board*, they were never fully eradicated.

Once *de jure* segregation had been eliminated, there were two paths to achieving greater integration: the slow but steady process of neighborhood integration visible nationwide in the period after 1970, or the immediate process of busing students to attend school outside their neighborhood. The preponderance of evidence points to the conclusion that integration achieved via the first mechanism has been more helpful than integration achieved via the second. In other words, integration through busing is an inferior substitute for integration by neighborhood change. Having formulated this basic hypothesis, we will now turn to a consideration of evolving trends in educational attainment, to determine whether the available facts support this conjecture.

Educational attainment

Fewer than one in ten African-Americans born in the first decade of the 20th century would go on to earn a high school diploma. Whites born in the same decade had a one-in-three chance. The racial disparity in high school graduation, plotted in Figure 6, shows significant evidence of narrowing over the next seven decades. The plot uses information on educational

²⁵ Schwartz (2010)

attainment recorded in the U.S. Census and American Community Survey at the time respondents were 30 to 39 years old. In terms of percentage points, there is little evidence of narrowing for cohorts born as recently as the 1930s – the 30-39 year olds of 1970 demonstrate a 26.5 percentage point gap, larger than the one recorded thirty years earlier.

The cohort born in the 1940s, by contrast, exhibits substantial progress by the time they are observed in 1980. By the time this group reached high school age, the *Brown v. Board* decision was a reality. As discussed above, however, the group would have witnessed little in the way of actual desegregation. The fifteen-percentage point gap among children of the 1940s diminishes still further, to 9 percentage points, among those born in the 1950s. A gap of similar magnitude persists among the most recently observed cohort, born in the 1970s. High school graduation, once uncommon among African-American students, has now become the norm.

The fact that the most rapid rate of progress in closing the high school graduation gap occurred among cohorts who came of age in the era of debate and action over school segregation suggests that the Civil Rights Movement had some effect. This conclusion has also been supported by research examining graduation trends on a finer-grained scale. Jonathan Guryan examined trends in graduation rates among youth who attended high school in districts subjected to court-ordered busing for integration in the 1960s and 1970s. Comparing students in birth cohorts that attended school immediately before and after the rulings reveals a significant improvement in relative black graduation rates.²⁶

Both the long-run time trend and the experiences of students in individual districts thus support the conjecture that the promise of integrated education – which for African-American high school students often meant access to superior facilities and equipment – influenced students' decisions to stay in school rather than drop out. This in turn supports the first part of

²⁶ Guryan (2004)

the basic argument above: *de jure* separate-but-allegedly-equal schools for African-Americans were harmful to their educational prospects and can explain a significant proportion of the disparities observed among students educated prior to *Brown v. Board* and later watershed events of the Civil Rights Movement.

Given Guryan's evidence that black dropout rates declined upon the imposition of court-ordered busing, one might conclude that the spate of court decisions that rescinded busing in the 1990s might have had the opposite impact. In fact, a study has shown exactly this pattern, with one important qualification. Byron Lutz's counterpart to Guryan's initial study finds that the revocation of busing orders leads to higher black dropout rates only in the states outside the South.

What should we make of this regional difference? Bear in mind that Southern communities, and therefore Southern school districts, have generally been more residentially integrated than those in the North. As a consequence, a reversion to neighborhood-based school assignment implies a more modest increase in school segregation in the South. Ultimately, the evidence is consistent with the argument that busing is a poor substitute for neighborhood integration. In the more integrated region, the layering on of busing had only a marginal impact.

The Supreme Court's 2007 ruling in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No 1* effectively brought all programs of busing to achieve racial balance to a halt. In the wake of this decision, integration advocates have focused attention on a handful of school districts that have maintained programs of busing that focus on equalizing the distribution of students according to characteristics other than race. North Carolina's Wake County Public School System, the state's largest district serving Raleigh and its suburbs, is the largest of these.

Wake County's students are assigned to schools according to a policy that strives to balance the socioeconomic and academic profile of all campuses in the system.

Does Wake County's commitment to busing translate into better educational attainment among its students? Basic statistics reported to the State's Department of Public Instruction cast doubt on this conclusion. Figure 8 shows graduation rates for students stratified by socioeconomic status in Wake County and North Carolina's second-largest district, Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. As noted above, CMS ceased busing in 2002, following a court mandate. Graduation rates in CMS are in fact higher both for disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students. This evidence suggests, once again, that busing is a poor substitute for neighborhood integration – perhaps to the extent of harming those students it intends to help.

While racial disparities in high school graduation rates have narrowed considerably over time, as completing high school became more of an expectation than an exception, college completion rates have followed a very different time pattern. Figure 9 uses the same data sources as Figure 7, tracking the proportion of adults aged 30-39 who report having earned a bachelor's degree. Attending and completing college was quite rare among those born in the earliest decades of the twentieth century; for those born before 1920 under 10% of both the white and black population earned a diploma.

Rates of college completion increased steady for students of all races over the 20th century, but in a manner that actually served to widen the black-white percentage point gap considerably. What was a 4-percentage-point gap among those born between 1900 and 1910 had become an 18 percentage-point gap among those born in the 1970s. Measuring the gap in terms of percentage points may not be the most appropriate method; one could just as truthfully state that white college graduation rates were about four times those of blacks in the earliest

cohort against a factor of less than two in the most recent group. Nonetheless, the clear evidence of racial convergence apparent in high school graduation rates can't be found here. It's also clear that the proportion of high school graduates who go on to complete a four-year college degree is significantly lower among African-Americans.

For these reasons, the overall educational attainment gap between black and white youth has widened over the past generation. Among youth in the 1979 NLSY cohort, born between 1958 and 1965, the white attainment advantage averaged to two-thirds of a school year. In the 1997 cohort, representing youth born between 1981 and 1985, the gap had widened to 1.2 years. In both cohorts, white respondents were roughly twice as likely as their African-American counterparts to have completed four years of college. Because the college completion rate increased overall, however, the raw magnitude of the disparity has risen.

Just as trends in the socioeconomic test score gap influence the interpretation of the black-white test score gap, differential patterns of educational attainment by family income are an important consideration here. In the 1979 NLSY cohort, respondents with a family income in the lowest quartile had completed an average of 12.5 years of schooling. By the 1997 cohort, the average schooling levels of students raised in the poorest quarter of families had actually fallen, to 12.2 years. In the highest three quartiles, by contrast, the mean years of schooling increased by more than a full year over the same interval. Rising educational inequality, in other words, manifests itself quite starkly in terms of educational attainment. Students from the poorest families have fallen further behind.

Just as the trend toward wider socioeconomic test score gaps would have forecast a rise in the black-white gap given the starting disadvantage for African-Americans, the widening socioeconomic attainment gap can account for a significant proportion of the rise in black-white

attainment inequality. Using a method similar to that above, imputing a predicted change in the black-white gap given racial economic disparities and the widening gap in educational attainment by economic status, we can account for approximately 80% of the half-year increase in the racial attainment gap. We are left, nonetheless, with the conclusion that there was no net progress and in fact some worsening in the gap between the two NLSY cohorts.

Why has the significant narrowing of the black-white high school graduation gap not been accompanied by comparable progress in college? To a large extent, the differences in postsecondary attainment reflect the persistence of the test score gap documented above. Although students of all races stand a much better chance of graduating from high school than their counterparts of a century ago, the continued disparities in academic performance render them unequally prepared to successfully transition to college.

In fact, were the test score gap to be eliminated the college completion rates of African-American students might well exceed those of white students. Figure 9 uses a unique data resource made available through the North Carolina Education Research Data Center, linking the population of public school students in the state to postsecondary records at each of the state's 16 four-year public universities.²⁷ The chart stratifies students by race and academic performance, measured by scores on a standardized test in mathematics administered at the end of 8th grade, presenting information on the likelihood that a student of a given race and test performance is observed obtaining a college degree within six years of completing high school.

The chart demonstrates, first and foremost, the key role of academic performance in determining the likelihood of success in college. Among students who obtain 8th grade math scores in the top tenth of their cohort, we eventually observe a third or more receiving a four-

²⁷ This chart was first generated in support of a collaborative project with Charles Clotfelter and Helen Ladd. See Clotfelter, Ladd, and Vigdor (2014).

year degree from a public institution in North Carolina. An additional, and unobserved, proportion receive degrees from public universities in other states or private colleges. Students who score near the middle of the distribution have a much lower chance of receiving a four-year college degree, and those scoring near the bottom have essentially no chance at all.

At any given level of 8th grade performance, with the exception of the very highest-performing students, African-Americans are substantially more likely to earn a degree than whites. Among students scoring at or around the median, for example, African-Americans go on to receive a 4-year degree from a North Carolina public university about 15% of the time, compared to under 10% in the white population.

The tendency for African-American students to attend college at higher rates white students with equivalent credentials has been previously noted.²⁸ Black students face extra incentives to obtain a 4-year degree, as the labor market rewards for a college diploma have been shown to be particularly large among minority populations.²⁹ Consequently, this behavior can be considered a rational response to incentives. This pattern also supports the assertion that the college completion gap noted above can be traced in large part to the black-white test score gap. The only way to reconcile the patterns in Figure 9 with the disparities apparent in Figure 8 is by recalling that even in the most recent cohorts, the black-white test score gap is substantial.

Summary

A century ago, students of different races attended public schools that were legally separate and strikingly unequal. Over a period of decades, these striking inequities receded. Resources in black schools increased gradually over time. After a decade or more of defiance

²⁸ Rivkin, 1995; Cameron and Heckman, 2001; Black and Sufi, 2002

²⁹ Arcidiacono, Bayer, and Hizmo, 2010.

following the *Brown v. Board* decision, the era of *de jure* segregated schools came to an end. The beneficial impact of these movements toward equality of opportunity, documented in prior studies, are difficult to mistake.

The era of busing students to achieve racial balance, rather than operate a system of purely neighborhood-based schools, has largely come to a close. The lessons of the busing era are complex. The opportunity to attend more integrated schools clearly influenced the school-leaving decisions of African-American adolescents. While the cessation of busing has led to an increase in school segregation by some measures, evidence of the impact of this policy shift on educational outcomes is mixed. School districts that continue to bus students to achieve balance do not necessarily obtain extraordinary outcomes among their disadvantaged students.

While it is uncertain whether the movement away from busing will be viewed as harmful in the long run, the trend toward lower educational attainment among children raised in disadvantaged families – a trend that by its nature sweeps up a disproportionate number of African-American youth – is unambiguously worrisome. In a world where postsecondary education has come to be seen as a necessity in a widening range of occupations, families below the 25th percentile of the income distribution have bucked the wider trend toward higher education levels. Although this divergence plays out on the campuses of universities and community colleges nationwide, the roots of the problem most likely arise earlier in a student's career.

As we have seen in preceding chapters, a general lesson of the Civil Rights Movement is that government action to improve the well-being of the disadvantaged can have a positive impact. The challenge in the realm of education is knowing which actions to take. Should government take aggressive action to place students of varying backgrounds in identical school

settings, even if that means taking students away from their homes and neighborhoods? Should government promote four-year liberal arts-style education as the model for all students, or steer a higher proportion toward vocational or technical education?

This latter question is of some interest because many other advanced nations, including many that outrank the United States on international assessments, more explicitly track students into vocational or academic tracks at a relatively young age. Were the United States to pursue this sort of policy, the predictable consequence would be racial stratification. This implication might be the most plausible explanation for why this nation elects not to pursue such policies. When it comes to education, though, there is no guarantee that a dedication to equalizing the nature of education for all students will promote equality in outcomes.

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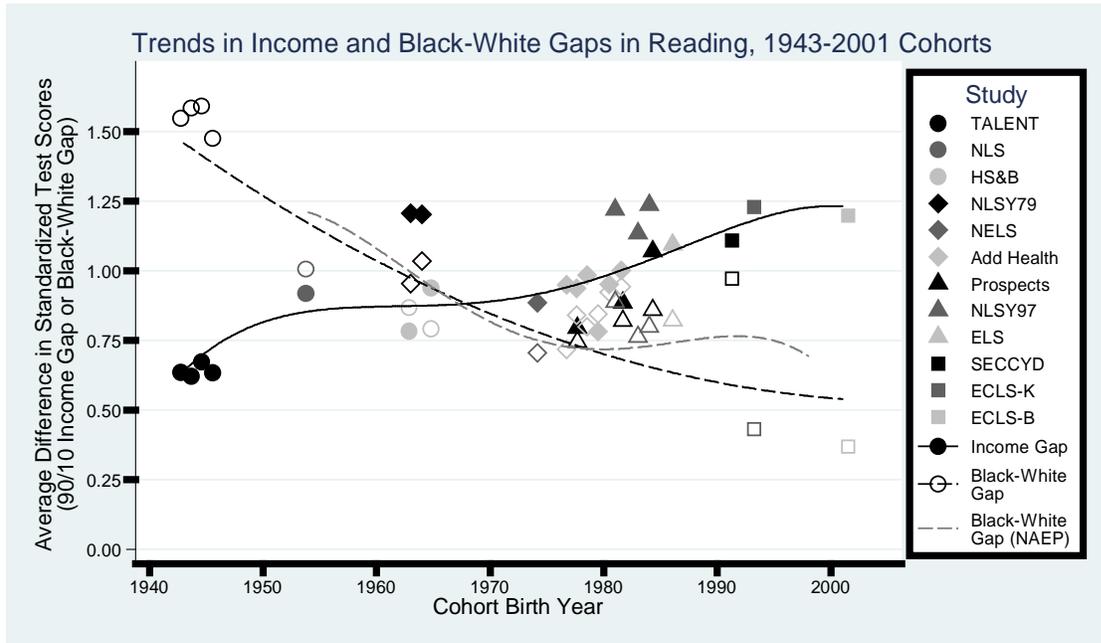
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FIGURE 5.3 Comparison of Income and Black-White Reading-Gap Trends (1943 to 2001 Cohorts)



Source: Author's compilation based on data from Project Talent (Flanagan et al. n.d.); NLS, NAEP, HS&B, NELS, ELS, ECLS-K, ECLS-B (U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics n.d., 1999, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2009, 2010); Prospects (U.S. Department of Education 1995); NLSY79, NLSY97 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1980, 1999); SECCYD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development 2010); and Add Health (Harris 2009, reading only).
 Note: Solid symbols represent 90/10 income achievement gaps; hollow symbols denote black-white achievement gaps. See note 6 and online appendix section 5.A5 for further details.

Figure 1. From Reardon (2011)

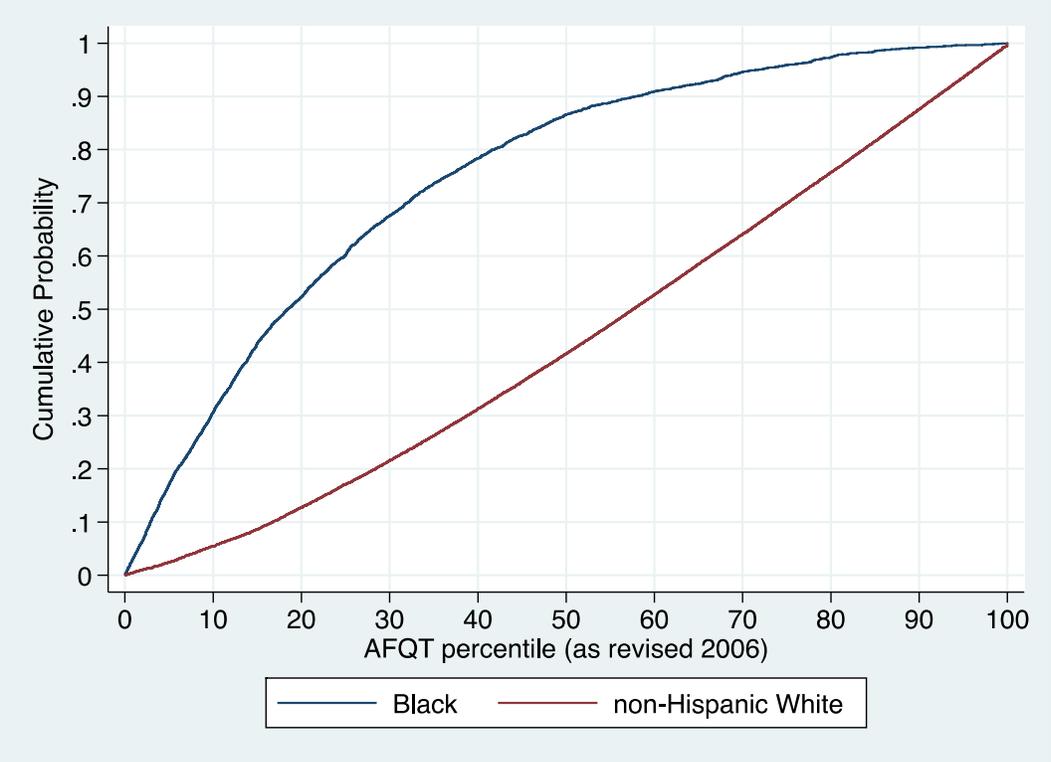


Figure 2: Cumulative density of AFQT percentiles by race, NLSY79

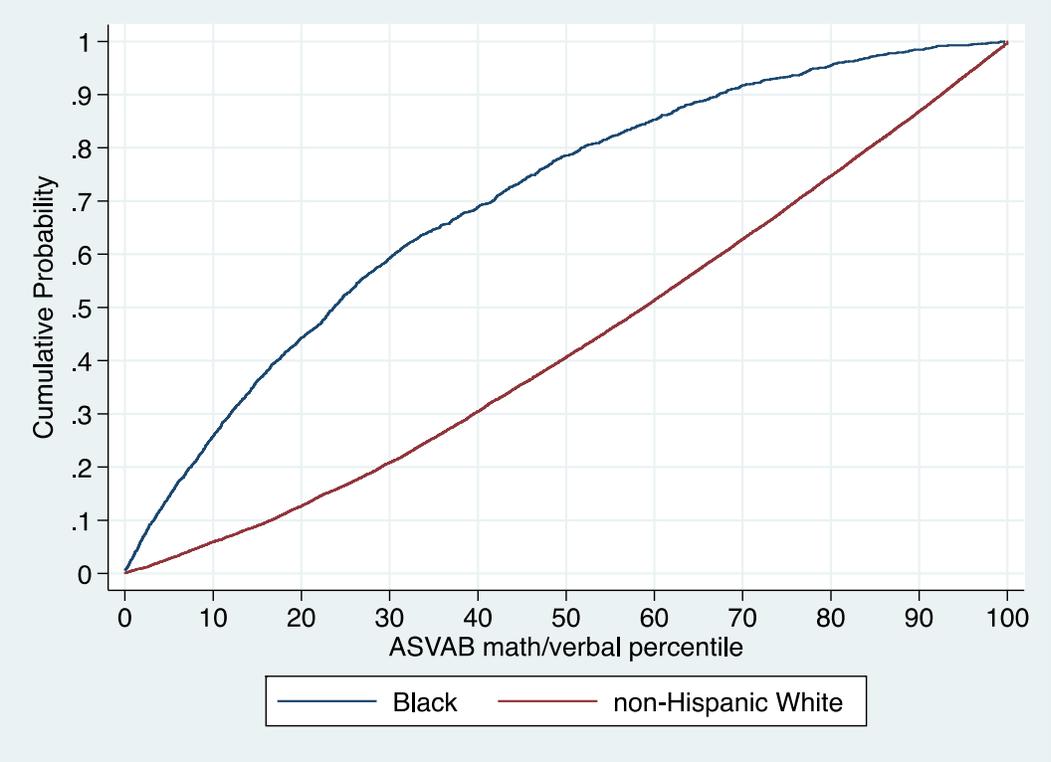


Figure 3: Cumulative density of ASVAB percentiles by race, NLSY97

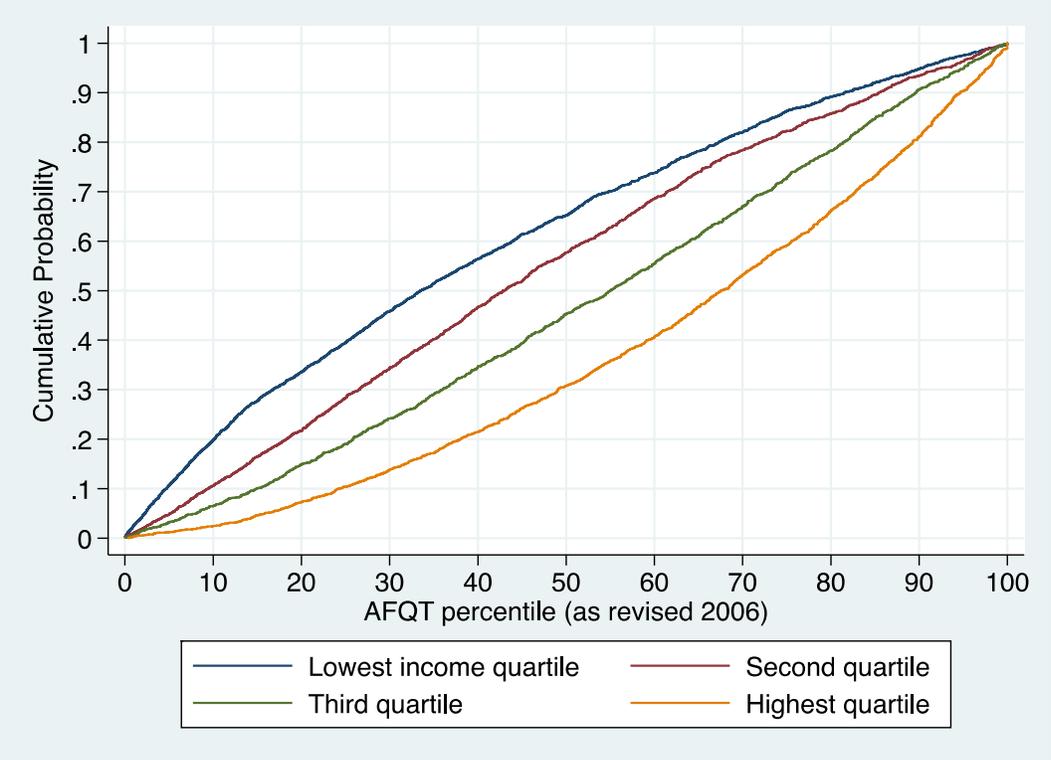


Figure 4: Cumulative density of AFQT percentiles by income quartile, NLSY79

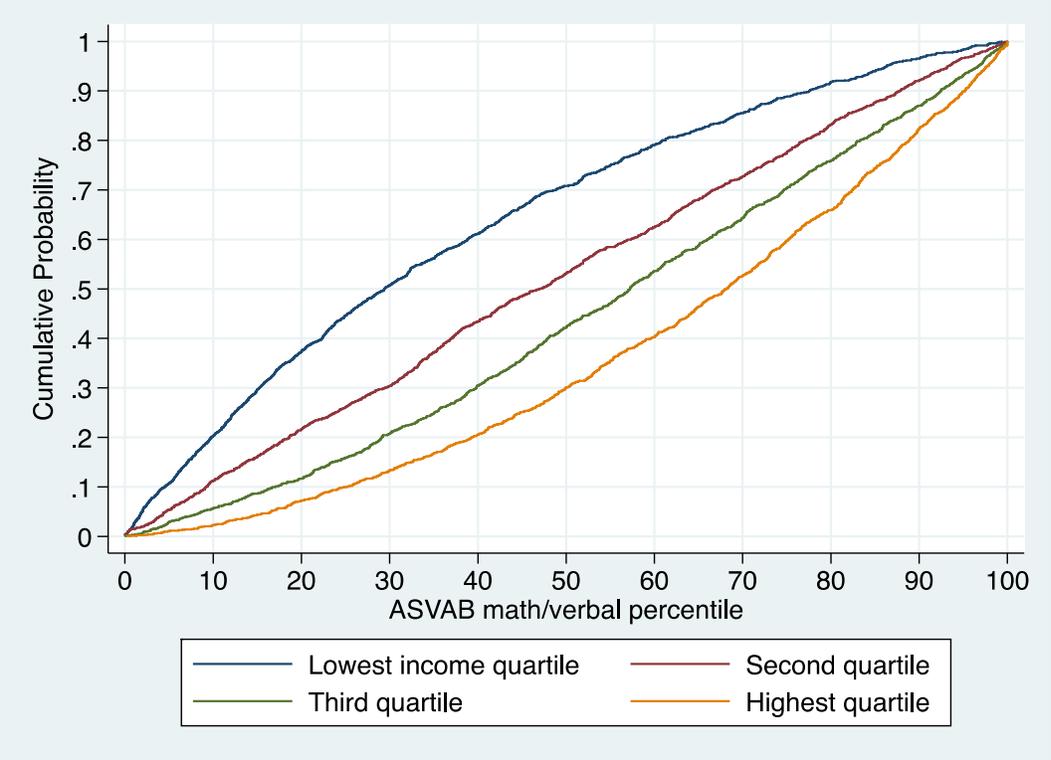


Figure 5: Cumulative density of ASVAB percentiles by income quartile, NLSY97

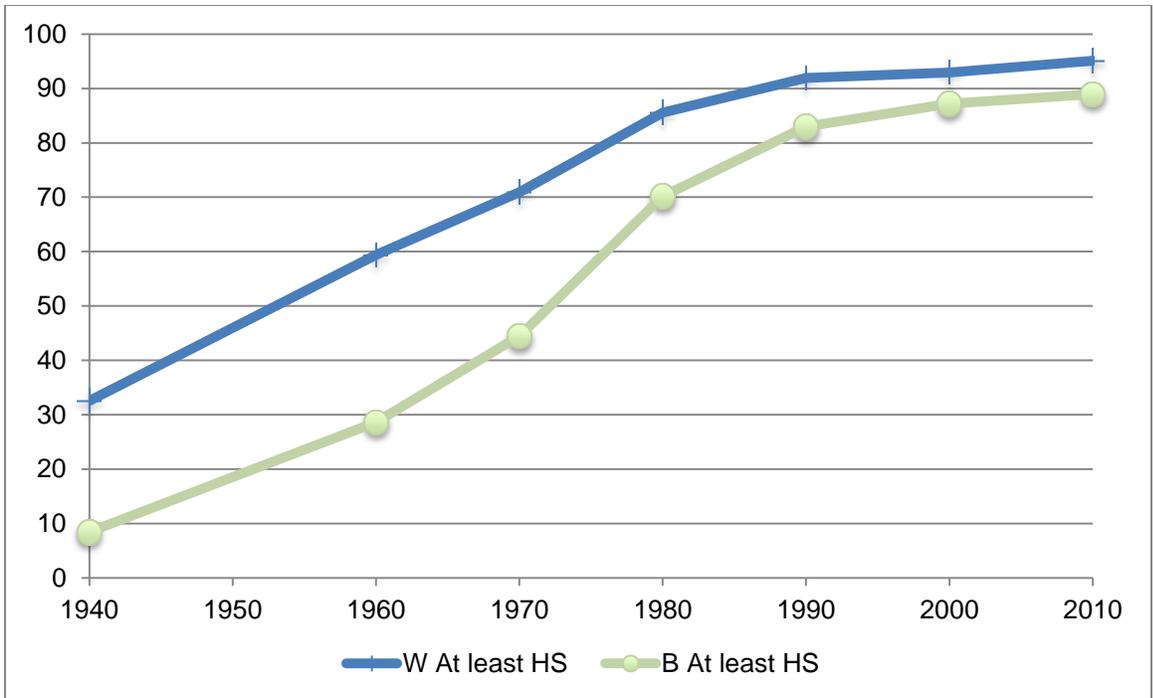


Figure 6: Proportion of 30-39 year olds with a high school diploma, by race, 1940-2010.

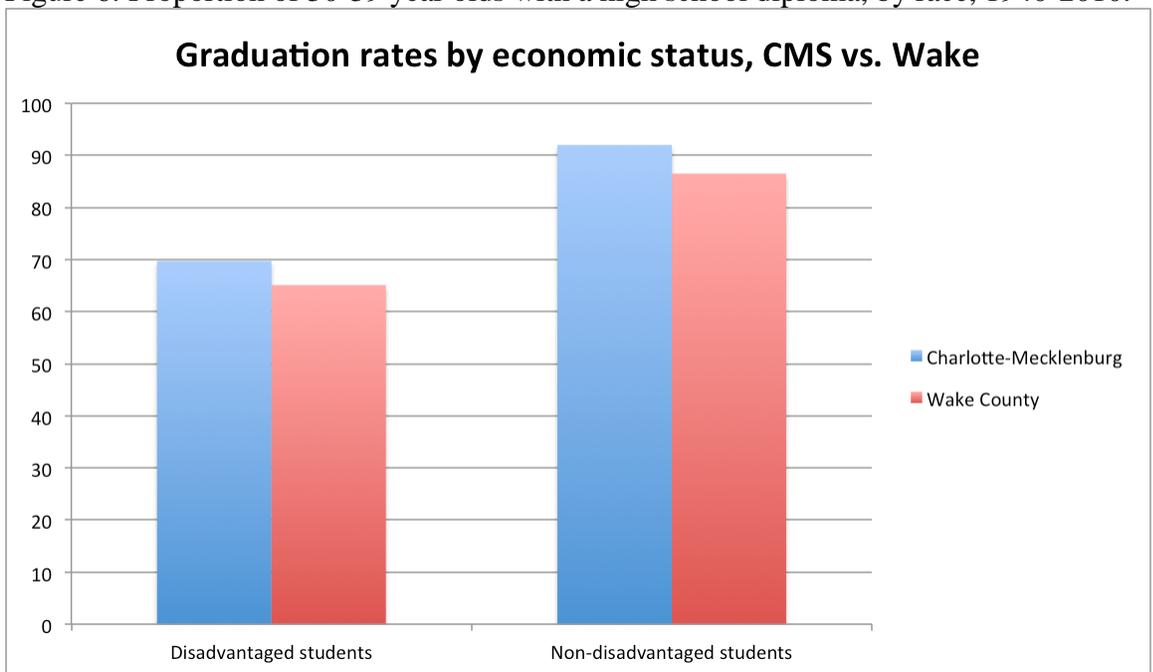


Figure 7: Graduation rates by economic status in two North Carolina districts.

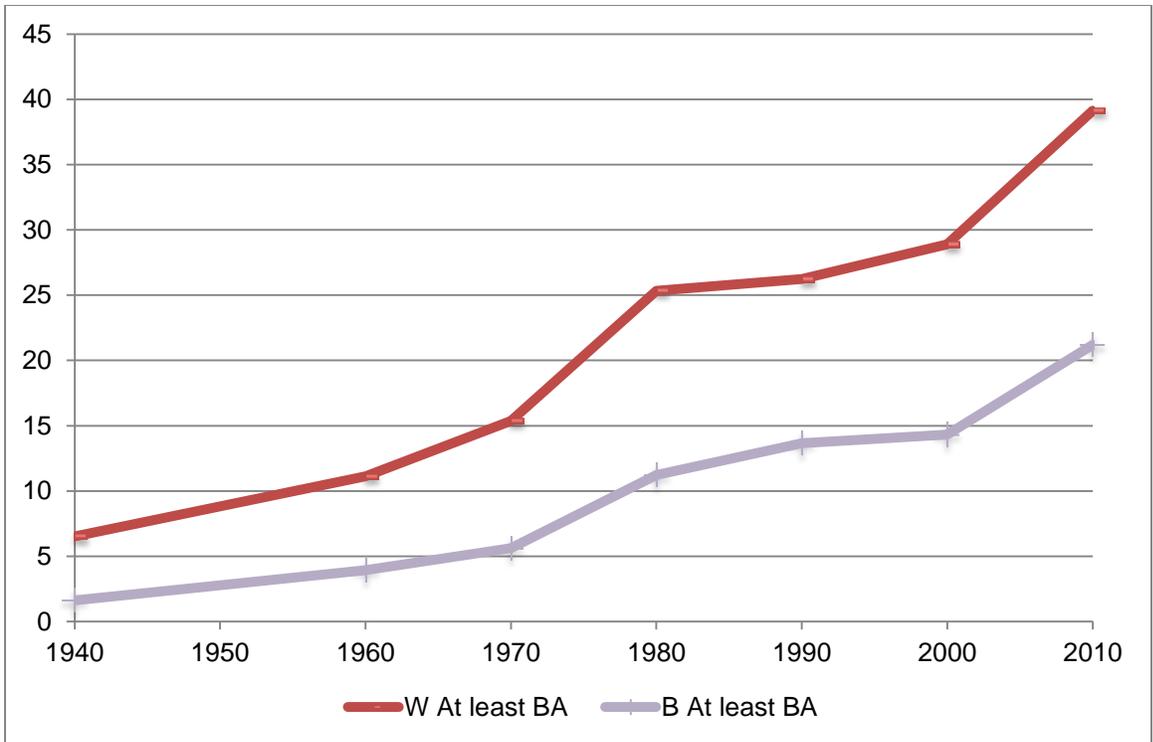


Figure 8: Proportion of 30-39 year olds with a 4-year college degree, by race, 1940-2010

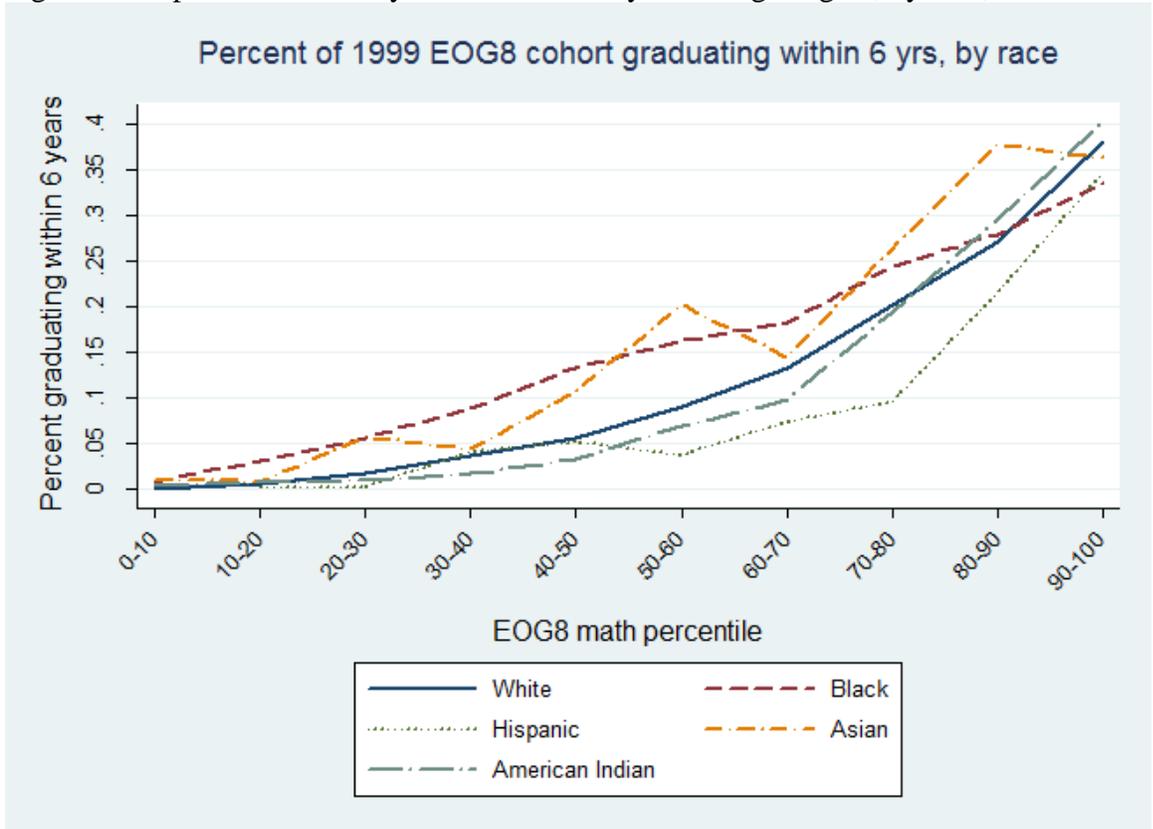


Figure 9