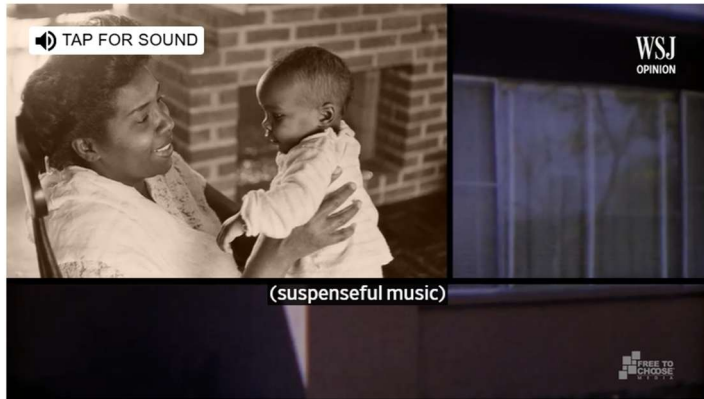


The Economics of Integration

The academic literature largely backs up my grandmother's views on its benefits and necessity.



Harvard economist Roland Fryer explains how social patterns persist in integrated schools and what actually shapes student success. Photo: Free to Choose Network

By Roland Fryer

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No topic was more prevalent around my grandmother's Sunday dinner table than the effect of segregation on black people. Over generous helpings of mashed potatoes, collard greens and pork chops smothered in brown gravy, I heard stories, some true and some rumored, about how segregation had shaped our community and those at the table.

Those folks had taken it upon themselves to undo segregation where they found it. My grandmother integrated schools as a sixth-grade teacher in Port Orange, Fla., in 1969. My great-aunt and great-uncle were the first black school principals in the area.

But growing up in the 1980s, I expressed mild skepticism of desegregation's importance: My integrated high school was as socially segregated as humanly possible, or so I thought. The black kids hung out with the black kids, the white kids hung out with the white kids. Only in locker rooms did we mix.

Every time I mentioned it, I was quickly scolded, albeit by my affectionate nickname. *What say you, Ju-Ju? Keep living, honey. You children have no idea what it was like to be required to drink at different water fountains, to sit in different sections of the bus, to fight a war only to come back home and be dehumanized*, a chorus of voices would insist.

They were right, of course. As an economist, I approach the subject differently—appreciating the raw emotions and scarring firsthand experience of my relatives, while applying the clarifying power of economic analysis. In the vast body of economic literature on desegregation, three seminal studies stand as pillars of the discussion.

First is the 2007 work of Douglas V. Almond, Kenneth Y. Chay and Michael Greenstone, titled "Civil Rights, the War on Poverty, and Black-White Convergence in Infant Mortality in the Rural South." They noted that the black-white infant mortality gap shrank substantially in the years after integration. This happened most dramatically in the rural South, where black hospital access had been especially poor before civil rights. Using data from Mississippi, where some hospitals were slower than others to desegregate, they found that black infant mortality indeed fell first in the counties where hospitals desegregated earlier.

Their findings are both stark and illuminating: Hospital desegregation “enabled over 5,000 black infants to survive until age 1 between 1965 and 1975 in the rural South and 25,000 through 2002.” Grandma 1, Ju-Ju 0.

Turning to education, Jonathan Guryan’s 2001 study on the effect of desegregation on black dropout rates offers another lesson. He revealed a significant decrease in dropout rates among black students following integration, highlighting the critical role of educational access in shaping economic futures. This study not only reinforces the importance of equal education but suggests there could be long-term economic benefits to it. Grandma 2, Ju-Ju 0.

Rucker Johnson’s 2011 paper, “Long-Run Impacts of School Desegregation & School Quality on Adult Attainments,” fleshes out those long-term effects, tracking the educational and economic outcomes of people exposed to desegregated schooling. His work reveals enduring benefits, including higher employment rates and income levels.

One of the brilliant aspects of Mr. Johnson’s research design is its ability to disentangle whether desegregation itself (increased exposure to white students) or access to more school resources (greater spending, better teachers) is more responsible for the positive effects of desegregation orders. The answer, based on Mr. Johnson’s evidence, points toward the latter.

This is consistent with what I learned over Sunday dinner at my grandmother’s house—access to resources is fundamental to black progress—but also with my youthful skepticism that being around more white people is helpful in and of itself. Score one for Ju-Ju.

While it’s clear that part of the advantage of integration came from access to resources, the role of social interactions is more nuanced. A 2012 study by Stephen B. Billings, David J. Deming and Jonah Rockoff on the end of busing in North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District pushes further on this question. Their findings suggest that “equal or greater resources combined with active policy efforts may be able to reduce the effect of school segregation on academic outcomes, but not crime.”

Other work by Raj Chetty takes a broader perspective, looking at modern levels of racial and economic integration rather than at abrupt changes in segregation policies. He finds that social mobility is higher in places where there is less residential racial segregation, and where people of different economic classes are more likely to be friends on social media, though it isn’t always clear how to interpret these correlations.

Through the lens of economic research, integration isn’t merely a moral or ethical endeavor but an economic necessity when access to important developmental resources are on the line. That was the kind of equality my grandmother’s generation fought for and largely, if not entirely, won. At the same time, the data suggest we could worry less about social interaction for its own sake.

Opportunity is no longer withheld explicitly on the basis of race—but some children still have far greater resources as they develop than others. We should make it our business, no matter our identities, to continue the work of ensuring that all Americans have an equal chance to reach their potential.

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