

Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity Commission Hearing Remarks

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July 15, 2008

Segregation is caused by a complicated set of inter-related processes—many of which have been insightfully and clearly elaborated upon by today’s expert witnesses. That having been said, in my comments I focus on just one part of this complicated process. But I note that this should not be taken to mean that it is the only one, or even the most important one. However, I believe it has not received much attention, and also feeds directly into the concerns of this committee: identifying policies and programs that might be instituted to reduce segregation.

I have spent more than a decade investigating the attitudes people hold about sharing neighborhoods with people of different races/ethnicities. My research on these racial residential preferences, however, tends to complicate what is too-often construed as a “personal choice” explanation for segregation. That is, the argument often goes: if preferences cause segregation, then policy has no role since we are segregated because people “want” it that way. In short, the preferences explanation is often pitted against the idea that there is housing discrimination, and the two are seen as independent and in competition with each other as explanations of segregation.

But my work tends to show that discrimination and preferences are not independent and that preferences are not “neutral” and “unproblematic” but rather constrained and complicated. For example, I show that to describe African American racial residential preferences as for “50-50” or majority-minority neighborhoods and to then conclude, as some have, that segregation is caused by minority preferences, is problematic. Indeed, if we look more in-depth at African American preferences, using different methods, we find that African American preferences are far from “segregation promoting.” Or, by asking why African Americans hold the preferences they do, we discover that it is less because of a “neutral” in-group preference, and more because of a desire to avoid discrimination in largely white communities.

Finally, I want to talk about a new concept—racial blind spots—that I have been developing with my colleagues in Detroit and Chicago. Much of our understanding of racial residential preferences comes from asking people in surveys about hypothetical neighborhoods with imaginary racial compositions. By gauging preferences in this way, we sidestep the really important point that people don’t buy imaginary homes in hypothetical neighborhoods—though in the current market, that might not be a bad idea. People buy and rent real homes in actual communities. And if people’s knowledge of the metropolitan area and the neighborhoods they might live in, is racialized—and by that I mean if residents of different racial/ethnic backgrounds know about different communities in the metropolitan area in which they live, and if that knowledge is shaped by the racial/ethnic composition of the community, then these patterns of knowledge—or the lack of knowledge—may constitute an important barrier to integrated living since it is difficult to move into a neighborhood if you don’t know anything about it.

In a recent large-scale survey in Chicago and Detroit, we showed people maps that identified many communities in the Chicago or Detroit metropolitan area and asked, among other things, which of them they “didn’t know anything about”.

For the most part, we find that whites, blacks, and Latinos all tend to know more about communities that their co-ethnics live in. But, it is also the case that African Americans and Latinos, relative to whites, know about a broader range of different kinds of communities—racially mixed and racially segregated alike. For African Americans and Latinos, the few “blind spots” are communities that are both predominately white and geographically distant from the city, thus creating a barrier to the possible integration of communities like this. But there are plenty of predominately white communities about which African Americans do not have a blind spots relative to whites; as such, there are clearly other barriers—perhaps discrimination, or perhaps “negative” knowledge about how African Americans are treated in these communities.

For their part, whites are far less likely than Latinos or African Americans to know about heavily African American communities; perhaps not surprisingly. But what is troubling, from the standpoint of encouraging integration, is that whites’ blind spots also include communities that are racially mixed (either with Latinos or African Americans)—even those where whites are in the majority. To remain stably integrated, of course, communities like this must have housing demand from all racial/ethnic groups. And our study shows whites have a blind spot for these kinds of communities.

In sum, to move to a place, a person must have knowledge of it. Of course, those who consult with real estate agents may be introduced to communities they never considered, but it is likely that many people approach an agent with a particular geography already in mind. Moreover, in another question on our survey, we learned that there is substantial racial matching between client and agent: the great majority of whites (98%), blacks (70%), and Latinos (70%) are assisted by a real estate agent of their same racial/ethnic background. Thus, although agents' "blind spots" are likely to be fewer than those of their clients, this race-matching of agent and client may further aggravate the barrier of community knowledge or at the least minimizes the improvements a real estate agent might offer.

Our study of racial blind spots suggests that affirmative marketing—educating residents about the variety of housing options available—is a critical step in the goal for integrated living. There are substantial racial blind spots in community knowledge that must be overcome. The kinds of work currently being done by places like the Oak Park Regional Housing Center or done in the future by the start-up, MoveSmart.org, are two examples of organizations seeking to reduce these kinds of blind spots. Policies and programs like this, in concert with the critical work on enforcement highlighted today, can be one part of the puzzle that is needed to help dismantle the pernicious pattern of segregation in many of our nation's cities.