

School Racial Composition and Parental Choice: New Evidence on the Preferences of White Parents in the United States

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Abstract

Racial segregation remains a persistent problem in U.S. schools. In this article, we examine how social psychological factors—in particular, individuals' perceptions of schools with varying demographic characteristics—may contribute to the ongoing structural problem of school segregation. We investigate the effects of school racial composition and several nonracial school characteristics on white parents' school enrollment decisions for their children as well as how racial stereotypes shape the school choice process. We use data from a survey-based experiment we designed to test “pure race” and “racial proxy” hypotheses regarding parents' enrollment preferences. We also use a measure of pro-white stereotype bias, both alone and in combination with school racial composition (percentage black). Using logistic regression analysis, we find support for the “pure race” hypothesis. The proportion of black students in a hypothetical school has a consistent and significant inverse association with the likelihood of white parents enrolling their children in that school net of the effects of the included racial proxy measures. In addition, higher levels of pro-white stereotype bias further inhibit enrollment, particularly in schools with higher proportions of black students. We discuss the implications of this research for policies aimed at mitigating racial segregation in U.S. schools.

Keywords

racial segregation, racial attitudes, school choice, racial proxy, experimental design

How do parents decide where to send their children to school? What role does the racial background of their children's prospective classmates play relative to other aspects of the schooling environment? More than 60 years after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, racial segregation remains an intractable problem in U.S. schools (Reardon and Owens 2014). Academic consensus regarding the precise levels of school segregation and nationwide trajectories in segregation patterns remains elusive, with some scholars observing substantial increases in school segregation levels in recent decades and others noting significant progress in reducing segregation (Billingham forthcoming; Fiel 2013; Frankenberg

2013; Frankenberg and Orfield 2012; Logan, Oakley, and Stowell 2008; Orfield and Lee 2007; Stroub and Richards 2013). Discrepancies regarding precise trajectories notwithstanding, it is clear that racial segregation—particularly between heavily white suburban districts and heavily non-

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white inner-city districts—remains high. The negative academic and non-academic consequences that persistent racial segregation can have for non-white students are well documented (Arum and Roksa 2011; Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012; Stiefel, Schwartz, and Chellman 2007). Moreover, given the confluence of race and class in U.S. society (Conley 1999), racial segregation tends to perpetuate an unequal distribution of resources between predominantly white and predominantly black schools (Johnson 2006). To mitigate the potentially deleterious social and economic consequences that segregation often entails, it is important to broaden our understanding of the causes of school segregation.

Efforts to explain the persistence of racial segregation in schools frequently focus on structural factors. School assignment catchment zones intersect with the reality of racial residential segregation to produce segregated schools (Saporito and Sohoni 2006, 2007). Moreover, the Supreme Court has limited the degree to which municipal officials can use structural changes to alleviate segregation; for instance, Court decisions now forbid the practice of cross-district busing and severely limit the degree to which racial composition can be taken into account in student assignment plans (Frankenberg 2013; Siegel-Hawley 2014). Along with structural constraints, individual preferences play a major role in enrollment and segregation trends, especially as parental school choice is given ever higher priority.

Given our knowledge of the effects of the (real or imagined) racial composition of individuals' immediate social environments on a host of outcomes, including attitudes toward residential integration (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Krysan et al. 2009), perceptions of group competition (Bobo and Hutchings 1996) and threat (Taylor 1998), perceptions of neighborhood disorder (Sampson and Raudenbush 2004) and crime (Quillian and Pager 2001), blacks' reports of racial discrimination (Hunt et al. 2007), and whites' racial political attitudes (Glaser 1994), the possible effect of school racial composition on parents' enrollment choices for their children is worthy of careful empirical scrutiny. However, a thorough consideration of the causes of educational segregation must also consider other racial attitudes and various ostensibly nonracial causes as well as possible interrelationships between these forces.

In this article, we draw on data from a new survey of U.S. parents to examine potential social psychological factors contributing to persistent

segregation. Specifically, we consider how white parents respond to the racial composition of schools; whether such perceptions operate independent of information on other, ostensibly non-race-related school characteristics; and the role that racial attitudes play in influencing parents' reactions to schools' racial makeup.

BACKGROUND

Racial Segregation in Schools: Structural Factors and the Impact of Parental School Choice

In the era of court-ordered desegregation of U.S. school systems, judges, activists, and scholars frequently differentiated between *de jure* segregation—the deliberate and mandated sorting of students from different racial backgrounds into different schools—and *de facto* segregation—the unintentional separation of students attributable to the implementation of race-blind and geographically efficient assignment strategies within cities beset by entrenched residential segregation. Decades have passed since the last assignment systems based on racial segregation were dismantled (Caldas and Bankston 2005; Clotfelter 2004; Reardon et al. 2012); indeed, student assignment plans that take race into account—even for the reverse objective of mitigating segregation—are increasingly facing legal challenges and being overturned (McDermott, DeBray, and Frankenberg 2012). As a result, the *de jure/de facto* distinction has diminished relevance for understanding current segregation patterns.

Instead, a more salient factor today affecting variation in levels of school segregation is parental choice (Kimmelberg and Billingham 2013; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013; Roda and Wells 2013). Parents have long had the option of removing their children from unsatisfactory public schools and enrolling them in private or parochial schools or homeschooling them, but in recent decades, the choice landscape has broadened considerably. The emergence of magnet schools in the 1970s and charter schools in the 1990s substantially broadened the educational marketplace, offering parents new tuition-free alternatives to traditional public schools (Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2008; Renzulli and Roscigno 2005). Moreover, the parental choice paradigm has had a growing influence on

student assignment practices within traditional public school districts as school systems have given families greater latitude to select schools based on their own preferences rather than automatically assigning all students to the schools nearest their homes (Billingham 2015; Cucchiara 2013b; Henig 1994; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013). Racial segregation in public schools has historically reflected racial segregation in neighborhoods (Clotfelter 2004; Frankenberg 2013; Reardon and Yun 2003), but the introduction of greater parental choice into the student assignment process has the potential to decouple school segregation from residential segregation and at its extreme allow the two trends to vary independently (Greene 2005; Orfield and Frankenberg 2013).

This potential decoupling has inspired optimistic projections from choice advocates regarding the use of school choice policies to mitigate entrenched inequality and segregation in schools (Forster 2006; Greene 2005; Schneider, Teske, and Marschall 2000; Van Heemst 2004; Viteritti 1999). Proponents of expanded choice champion a “liberation model” of school choice (Archbald 2004), which asserts that school choice promotes equity by liberating lower-income and minority students from underperforming schools. By encouraging greater and more informed school choice among non-white families, the theory suggests, market forces can engender more equitable educational outcomes within school systems, giving all students—not just affluent white students—the chance to attend the best schools. Some limited evidence suggests that under certain circumstances, increased choice may in fact have a “liberating” effect, leading to decreased segregation and enhanced outcomes for disadvantaged students (Archbald 2004).

The preponderance of evidence to date, however, suggests the reverse, namely, that augmented parental choice tends, on average, to aggravate inequality and segregation in schools, not mitigate it (Fuller and Elmore 1996; Kimelberg and Billingham 2013; Saporito 2003; cf. Archbald 2000). Indeed, research into the links between residential segregation and school segregation indicates that school districts tend to be more segregated than the cities within which they are situated and school segregation would decline if students were all assigned to their local schools rather than allowing parents to influence the placement of their children through school choice (Saporito and Sohoni 2006, 2007; Sohoni and Saporito 2009).

On balance, the enhancement of parental school choice has not led to substantial reductions in the level of segregation in U.S. schools, and in some places, it may in fact have contributed to increased segregation (see Kimelberg and Billingham 2013). Moreover, the proliferation of private, magnet, and charter schools contributes to increased levels of racial and economic segregation in large school districts (Saporito and Sohoni 2006, 2007). People who choose charter schools tend to enter schools that are more racially segregated than the districts from which they came (Garcia 2008; Stein 2015). Charter schools offer an avenue for “white flight,” drawing white students away from public school districts, particularly in districts with higher levels of racial integration (Renzulli and Evans 2005). Although magnet schools are often established with the explicit goal of pursuing racial diversity, in practice they have not always achieved that goal (Frankenberg and Siegel-Hawley 2008; Saporito 2003; Smrekar and Honey 2015). Magnet schools face increasing difficulty in achieving their integration goals, particularly as they struggle to attract white families “against the backdrop of declining budgets and diminishing public interest in racially diverse schooling” (Smrekar and Honey 2015:138).

What Do Parents Look for in a School? Racial and Nonracial Criteria in Parental Choice

In an era in which parents’ choices play such a substantial role in determining the demographic and economic makeup of schools’ student bodies, it is critical to understand the factors that parents deem important in making their selections. School choice theory tends to presume that parents will select schools based purely on academic criteria, but parents’ bounded rationality often leads them to make choices based on expedient, non-academic factors, including schools’ racial composition (Wells and Crain 1992), thus potentially contributing to increased racial segregation. However, social desirability bias poses a challenge to identifying the role that racial concerns play in school choice as parents are often reluctant to express racially oriented motivations for their behavior. As a result, it is important to distinguish between respondents’ expressed opinions and their behaviors.

When asked in surveys which school characteristics have the largest influence in determining their school choices, respondents tend to emphasize factors related to academic achievement and downplay school racial/ethnic composition and other demographic factors (Bosetti 2004; D. N. Harris and Larsen 2015; Kelly and Scafidi 2013; Kleitz et al. 2000; Schneider et al. 2000; Weiher and Tedin 2002). In some circumstances, white parents do explicitly cite racial concerns as reasons for choosing or not choosing specific schools for their children. Among white parents interviewed in Boston, Los Angeles, and St. Louis, Johnson and Shapiro (2003) found many examples of explicit references to anti-black attitudes in their decisions about where to enroll their children. Similarly, Bagley, Woods, and Glatter (2001) found some evidence of white parents in the United Kingdom consciously avoiding schools with a significant non-white presence. One parent declared that she rejected a school “because of the coloured children. I think there’s too many. . . . I don’t like all the coloureds being there” (Bagley et al. 2001:316). Cucchiara (2013a) found that white parents choosing an urban school had significant concerns about the racial makeup of the student body, and many resisted sending their children to schools where they would be part of a numerical racial minority. These examples notwithstanding, in most cases, student body racial composition per se is not explicitly mentioned as a major criterion guiding school selection among parents, and when it is, it tends to fall below academic performance in terms of importance.

Even if parents do not declare race to be a salient factor when asked in surveys, the impact of race on enrollment patterns emerges in studies of parental choice *behavior*. Schneider and Buckley (2002) examined how parents searched for schools in Washington, D.C., using an online school choice resource. Their results indicate that on average, parents sought out schools that were whiter than the average D.C. school. In fact, when looking at the criteria users examined, school demographic composition was more frequently among the first criteria inspected than any other school characteristic, including test scores, despite the fact that on surveys, respondents were less likely to say that the demographic composition of the student body was a significant factor in their school choice practices (Schneider and Buckley 2002). Analyzing data on intra-district student transfers, Phillips, Larsen, and

Hausman (2015) found that white students zoned to schools in diverse areas were the most likely of all groups to engage in intra-district choice. School racial composition was one of the prime driving factors of these transfers; in fact, the academic performance of their locally zoned schools had no significant impact on the likelihood of transferring net of other factors. Saporito and Lareau (1999), examining data on intra-district student transfers, identified a two-stage process by which white parents selected schools: These parents first eliminated from consideration altogether schools with a heavy black presence and only then considered other school criteria to make a final decision.

As the impact of families’ residential location on children’s school assignment diminishes and as the influence of parents’ personal preferences increases, it is critical to understand what factors parents take into account when selecting schools for their children and what the ramifications of those preferences are for school demographics and academic outcomes. A substantial body of research addresses this question, examining the degree to which parents value academic and non-academic school characteristics in making their decisions. To date, however, most of this research has been situated within real schools and school districts. Because the association between school racial composition and academic performance remains strong in U.S. schools, it is difficult to distinguish the effect of academic quality from the effect of demographics in parents’ evaluations of existing schools. By randomly and independently varying the racial composition and academic quality of hypothetical schools, this study can determine more clearly than previous observational research the impact of student body demographics on parents’ perceptions of schools and their potential school choice behavior.

In addition, using a series of bipolar trait ratings of whites and blacks (e.g., hardworking/lazy, peaceful/violent, intelligent/unintelligent), we can gauge the extent to which respondents evaluate blacks as inferior (or superior) to whites across a range of characteristics as well as how large the perceived gap is between the groups (Jackman and Senter 1983). Past research using this “difference score” approach shows that negative stereotyping of blacks clearly continues to exist (Bobo and Kluegel 1997). Furthermore, Jackman (1994) and others argue persuasively that even small perceived group differences are

sufficient to produce differential treatment. Such negative racial stereotypes powerfully shape social distance preferences in the United States, including neighborhood integration attitudes (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996) and support for race-targeted public policies (Bobo and Kluegel 1993; Tuch and Hughes 1996). Given the demonstrated utility of such racial attitudes measures in past work, including within the neighborhood preferences literature we model our research on, the current study provides a compelling opportunity to investigate how racial stereotypes may affect school enrollment preferences—both directly and in conjunction with factors such as school racial composition.

The Racial Proxy Hypothesis and Its Applicability for School Choice Research

Disentangling the effects of schools' racial characteristics and their academic quality on parental preferences is challenging, but experimental research into the determinants of housing preferences can be used as a guide. Given the intractability of racial residential segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas, social scientists have tried to determine whether white residents avoid integrated and heavily black neighborhoods because of explicit racial antipathy (i.e., a "pure race" effect) or whether they avoid such neighborhoods because they believe certain undesirable neighborhood characteristics (e.g., high crime or "signs of disorder") are more prevalent in non-white neighborhoods (Krysan et al. 2009; Lewis, Emerson, and Klineberg 2011; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999, 2004). The "racial proxy" hypothesis, found primarily in sociological research on housing preferences, asserts that white residents' observed reluctance to live in neighborhoods with more than a nominal African American presence is attributable not to racism but rather to whites' concerns regarding ostensibly nonracial factors that are presumed to be associated with African American neighbors. For instance, this theory suggests, whites may resist moving to heavily black neighborhoods not because they hold anti-black attitudes but rather because such areas are commonly associated with higher levels of crime, lower home values, and lower-quality schools, among other traits (see e.g., D. R. Harris 1999; Swaroop and Krysan 2011).

Operationally, testing the racial proxy hypothesis involves assessing whether racial composition plays an independent role in shaping neighborhood preferences when the effects of various other factors *associated with race* (e.g., housing values, crime, and poverty) are included in the same model (see e.g., Charles 2000; Ellen 2000; Emerson, Chai, and Yancey 2001; D. R. Harris 2001; Krysan et al. 2009; Lewis et al. 2011; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999). Despite its widespread appearance as a potential explanation for the persistence of residential segregation and inequality, the racial proxy hypothesis has not been adequately examined as a potential explanation for the persistence of segregation and inequality in U.S. schools. To help remedy this neglect, we designed a survey experiment allowing us to gauge the relative roles of racial composition and various "racial proxy" factors in shaping U.S. parents' school enrollment decisions for their children. We report the results of this research in the current article, which we organized around three primary research questions:

Research Question 1: How does school racial composition affect enrollment decisions when parents also consider school characteristics for which race may serve as a proxy?

Research Question 2: How do these other school characteristics shape enrollment decisions?

Research Question 3: Do parents' racial stereotypes affect enrollment decisions, and does this vary across different school racial compositions?

DATA AND METHODS

To examine these questions, we use data from the Race, Racial Attitudes, and School Segregation Survey (RRASS), designed by the authors and conducted in December 2014. The survey was implemented (and data were collected) by the firm SurveyMonkey through their SurveyMonkey Audience (SMA) program. SMA maintains a network of millions of respondents whom it recruits when they visit a SurveyMonkey website. These volunteers participate in surveys in return for non-cash rewards, including donations to charities of their choice and entries into sweepstakes to win prizes.¹ Respondents to RRASS were offered no

direct material incentives either by us or by SurveyMonkey. Our final data set included 1,259 respondents.²

The use of online non–full probability sampling is still relatively new in the social sciences and is not without its challenges. In particular, because rates of Internet access remain unequal across racial, ethnic, and income groups, online surveys are likely insufficiently representative of disadvantaged groups. Many survey firms attempt to address this problem by targeting underrepresented groups, but the challenge of producing a representative sample and the implications of this problem for statistical inference and generalization remain. The sample generated by SMA was not a random one, but research shows that online survey platforms yield results that approximate those observed using population-based probability sampling (Simmons and Bobo 2015; Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014).³ To approximate a representative sample, SMA tailors the composition of the “audience” to reflect research prerogatives and to match as closely as possible the age, gender, and geographic makeup of the U.S. adult population. Because of our focus on school choice behavior, we limited the sample to respondents who had at least one child, regardless of that child’s age.⁴ Given our interest in the role of “pure race” and “racial proxy” factors shaping school choice decisions and the relatively small numbers of racial/ethnic minorities in our sample, we limit the current study to respondents who self-identified as white and for whom we have complete data on all variables of interest ($N = 862$).⁵

RRASS used an experimental manipulation to investigate how parents respond to varying school characteristics. Respondents were presented with the following hypothetical scenario, modeled on the hypothetical housing search scenario developed in Emerson and colleagues (2001) and elaborated in Lewis and colleagues (2011):

Please imagine that you have a five-year-old child who is about to enter elementary school for the first time this fall. You are searching for educational options, and you must choose whether or not to select your local public school. This is the only public school option available to you, and if you choose not to enroll in this school, you will either have to apply to send your child to an expensive private school, homeschool

your child, or move to another neighborhood or city with other public school options.

Four characteristics of the school were randomly varied, independent of one another. First, we introduced three school characteristics for which race often serves as a proxy: school safety, quality of school facilities, and school academic performance. Perceptions of schools’ safety are commonly associated with students’ prevailing racial characteristics (Cucchiara 2013a; Johnson and Shapiro 2003). As an indicator of school safety, half the respondents were informed that at the hypothetical school they must pass by a security guard, walk through a metal detector, and have their bags searched (common occurrences at many U.S. schools with higher proportions of black students; see Bachman, Randolph, and Brown 2011). The other half were told that they must simply sign in at the front desk, with no added security measures.

As an indicator of the quality of school facilities (which are of poor quality more frequently in schools with higher proportions of low-income and minority students; see Alexander and Lewis 2014; U.S. Department of Education 2000), respondents were told that the school’s facilities (classrooms, computer lab, auditorium, and gym) had last been renovated in a certain year. The survey had 10 hypothetical renovation years, divided into three-year increments ranging from 1987 to 2014, with 10 percent of the sample randomly assigned to each year.⁶

Because academic performance is commonly cited by survey respondents as their paramount concern when selecting schools (see Schneider et al. 2000) and because school racial composition is often perceived as an indicator of academic character (see Ispa-Landa and Conwell 2015), our hypothetical scenarios include a measure of academic quality. As an indicator of school academic performance, respondents were informed of the hypothetical school’s ranking out of all elementary schools in the district on student performance on a state-administered standardized test. There were 10 hypothetical academic scenarios (1st out of 10 through 10th out of 10), with 10 percent of the sample randomly assigned to each scenario.

Finally, we randomly varied the racial and ethnic composition of the school’s student body. To limit the number of potential scenarios and

because the racial proxy literature tends to focus on the presence of African Americans as a factor in residential choices, we varied only the proportion of black and white students at the school. Given that the United States is an increasingly multiethnic society, with rapidly growing Hispanic and Asian subpopulations, each respondent was told that 10 percent of the students were Asian and 10 percent were Hispanic. The remaining 80 percent of students were divided in five percentage-point increments between blacks and whites, ranging from 0 percent white and 80 percent black to 80 percent white and 0 percent black.⁷ Taking into account the three racial proxy measures and the racial/ethnic breakdown, a given respondent may have been presented with the following scenario:

When you visit your local public school and look into whether it is suitable for your child, you find that:

- You are greeted by a security guard and must pass through a metal detector, have your bags searched, and sign in at the front desk.
- The last major renovation of the school's core facilities (classrooms, computer lab, auditorium, and gym) took place in 1996.
- Out of 10 elementary schools in the district, the students in this school were ranked 3rd on the state standardized achievement exam.
- The racial composition of the student body is: 55% black, 25% white, 10% Asian, and 10% Hispanic.

After reading about this hypothetical school, respondents were asked how likely (very likely, somewhat likely, somewhat unlikely, or very unlikely) they would be to enroll their children in the hypothetical school. Respondents had the option to select "don't know."

Dependent Variable

The likelihood of enrollment serves as the dependent variable in the analyses reported here. We collapsed the response categories into a dichotomous likely/unlikely outcome measure for the purpose of binary logistic regression analysis. Respondents who skipped this question or who selected "don't know" were omitted from the analysis.

Independent Variables and Analytic Strategy

Our primary objective in this research is to investigate the degree to which the racial composition of a school's student body influences the likelihood that parents will choose to enroll in the school when also considering information on a range of factors known to affect school choice. In addition, to further enhance our investigation of the "pure race" hypothesis, we examine the role that racial attitudes play in shaping parents' responses to given scenarios both independently and in combination with school racial composition.

School racial composition is a continuous measure, ranging from a student body that is 0 percent black (and 80 percent white, 10 percent Asian, and 10 percent Hispanic) to 80 percent black (and 0 percent white, 10 percent Asian, and 10 percent Hispanic). Regarding the racial proxy measures, *test score rank* is a variable measuring the hypothetical school's numerical ranking (out of 10 local schools) on the state standardized test. Higher values (e.g., 10th out of 10) indicate a lower rank and thus suggest lower academic quality. *Years since last renovation* is a continuous measure, ranging from 0 to 27. Higher values indicate a longer period of time since the hypothetical school has last been upgraded. *School security* is a dichotomous variable that describes the severity of the security apparatus when parents encounter the hypothetical school (1 = metal detector, security guard, and bag search; 0 = no intensive security apparatus).

To gauge the impact of racial attitudes on school choice, we used a battery of questions on racial stereotypes adapted from items commonly deployed in the American National Election Studies and General Social Surveys. Specifically, we asked respondents to rate black people and white people separately on four characteristics—intelligence/unintelligence, violence/peacefulness, laziness/diligence, and trustworthiness/untrustworthiness.⁸ Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (e.g., unintelligent) to 7 (e.g., intelligent). We created attitudinal difference scores for each characteristic by subtracting each respondent's answer for blacks from his or her answer for whites. Negative values on these difference measures indicate that a respondent believes blacks are, on average, more intelligent, peaceful, diligent, or trustworthy than whites; positive values indicate a belief that whites are, on average, more

intelligent, peaceful, diligent, or trustworthy than blacks. We added the difference scores for these four variables to create a scale of racial attitudes (Cronbach's alpha = .799); we incorporate this *perceived white superiority* measure as an independent variable in Model 2 of Table 2. This scale ranges from -24 to 24, with lower values indicating more positive attitudes toward blacks and higher values indicating more positive attitudes toward whites.⁹

Research Expectations

In line with our discussion of prior research and guided by our key research questions, we present the following research expectations: The racial proxy hypothesis will gain support if the proxy factors (i.e., test scores, security, and school facilities) significantly affect enrollment decisions but school racial composition does not. Alternatively, the pure race hypothesis will gain support if school racial composition significantly affects enrollment decisions (independent of any effects of the racial proxy measures). In addition, we examine whether respondents' racial stereotypes interact with the four school characteristics variables in shaping enrollment decisions to shed further light on the pure race and racial proxy arguments. Our expectation here, in line with the logic of the pure race argument, is that pro-white/anti-black attitudes will magnify the negative impact of school racial composition on parents' enrollment decisions (i.e., parents with the strongest anti-black sentiment will be most sensitive to changes in school racial composition).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in this analysis. As discussed earlier, the vignette included 17 racial composition scenarios, 10 academic performance scenarios, 10 school facilities scenarios, and 2 school security scenarios; allocation of respondents to each scenario was random, and roughly equal numbers of respondents were presented with each scenario (exact figures are available from the authors upon request). Table 1 reports the means and standard deviations for these various scenarios. The schools described to respondents had a mean black student composition of 40.3 percent, a mean ranking of 5.5 out of 10 among local schools on the

state standardized test, and had gone an average of 13.4 years since their last renovation. In addition, approximately 52 percent of respondents were told they would have to submit to heightened security screening at the school.

Most respondents displayed very little overt prejudice toward blacks or whites; the modal score on the white superiority attitudes scale was 0. However, the mean was positive, at 1.1, indicating that white respondents tended, on average, to hold slightly more positive views of whites than of blacks. All respondents were parents, and the vast majority had children living at home (mean = 1.6), but some (about 7 percent) had children who did not live in their households. On average, respondents had more children enrolled in public schools (1.1) than in private schools (.2). A small percentage of respondents had homeschooled children or children too young to be enrolled in school.

The sample reflects the U.S. population in terms of gender and geographic location, but it was more affluent and more highly educated than the general public. Households earning less than \$50,000 per year were underrepresented in the sample, and higher earners were overrepresented. Moreover, 20 percent of respondents refused to provide their income on the survey. Rather than eliminate these cases from the analysis or attempt an imprecise imputation of these incomes within the five-category income variable, we retained them within a sixth income category (refused/don't know). The educational distribution of respondents also skewed high. Only about 1 in 16 respondents had a high school education or less, nearly 1 in 3 had a graduate degree, and more than two-thirds had completed college. With the exception of the income variable, cases with missing data were deleted listwise. In the Discussion section, we address possible limitations to our findings resulting from the handling of missing data and from the slight overrepresentation of more affluent and educated respondents.

Among the 862 respondents included in the analysis, about half (51.4 percent) reported they would be very likely or somewhat likely to enroll in the hypothetical school described in the vignette presented to them. In line with the pure race hypothesis, however, the likelihood of enrollment varied significantly between schools with divergent racial composition. Figure 1 portrays the proportion of respondents presented with schools varying in racial composition who reported they were either very likely or somewhat likely to

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

| | Mean or percentage | SD | Minimum | Maximum |
|---|--------------------|-------|---------|---------|
| Respondent would enroll in hypothetical school (percentage) | 51.4 | | 0 | 1 |
| Percentage black in hypothetical school | 40.3 | 24.1 | 0 | 80 |
| Hypothetical school's ranking on state standardized test | 5.5 | 2.9 | 1 | 10 |
| Years since hypothetical school's last renovation | 13.4 | 8.5 | 0 | 27 |
| Heightened security in hypothetical school (percentage) | 51.7 | | 0 | 1 |
| Scale of white superiority attitudes | 1.1 | 2.6 | -6 | 24 |
| School percentage black × white superiority scale | 42.8 | 132.0 | -400 | 1920 |
| Test ranking × white superiority scale | 5.1 | 14.4 | -60 | 144 |
| Renovation years × white superiority scale | 14.0 | 40.8 | -135 | 351 |
| Heightened security × white superiority scale | 0.5 | 1.9 | -6 | 14 |
| Number of children enrolled in public schools | 1.1 | 0.9 | 0 | 6 |
| Number of children enrolled in private/religious schools | 0.2 | 0.6 | 0 | 6 |
| Number of children homeschooled | 0.1 | 0.5 | 0 | 7 |
| Number of children not enrolled in school | 0.2 | 0.5 | 0 | 3 |
| Female (percentage) | 51.7 | | 0 | 1 |
| Respondent's income (percentage) | | | | |
| Less than \$25,000 | 5.1 | | 0 | 1 |
| \$25,000-\$49,999 | 9.7 | | 0 | 1 |
| \$50,000-\$99,999 | 29.4 | | 0 | 1 |
| \$100,000-\$149,999 | 20.6 | | 0 | 1 |
| \$150,000 or above | 15.1 | | 0 | 1 |
| Refused/don't know | 20.1 | | 0 | 1 |
| Respondent's highest level of education (percentage) | | | | |
| Less than high school | 0.9 | | 0 | 1 |
| High school diploma/GED | 5.5 | | 0 | 1 |
| Some college/associate's degree | 25.8 | | 0 | 1 |
| Bachelor's degree | 35.5 | | 0 | 1 |
| Graduate degree | 32.4 | | 0 | 1 |
| Region (percentage) | | | | |
| New England | 7.7 | | 0 | 1 |
| Middle Atlantic | 13.3 | | 0 | 1 |
| East North Central | 18.2 | | 0 | 1 |
| West North Central | 8.7 | | 0 | 1 |
| South Atlantic | 15.0 | | 0 | 1 |
| East South Central | 5.6 | | 0 | 1 |
| West South Central | 6.8 | | 0 | 1 |
| Mountain | 7.8 | | 0 | 1 |
| Pacific | 16.9 | | 0 | 1 |
| N | | 862 | | |

Note: Descriptive statistics are for the variables used in the equations in Table 2, the mean enrollment figures portrayed in Figure 1, and the predicted probabilities portrayed in Figure 2. The data come from the Race, Racial Attitudes, and School Segregation Survey designed by the authors and conducted by SurveyMonkey Audience in December 2014. The sample contains all observations of self-identified white respondents with complete data on all variables shown in Table 1. Cases with missing data (N = 95) were deleted listwise. Data are unweighted.

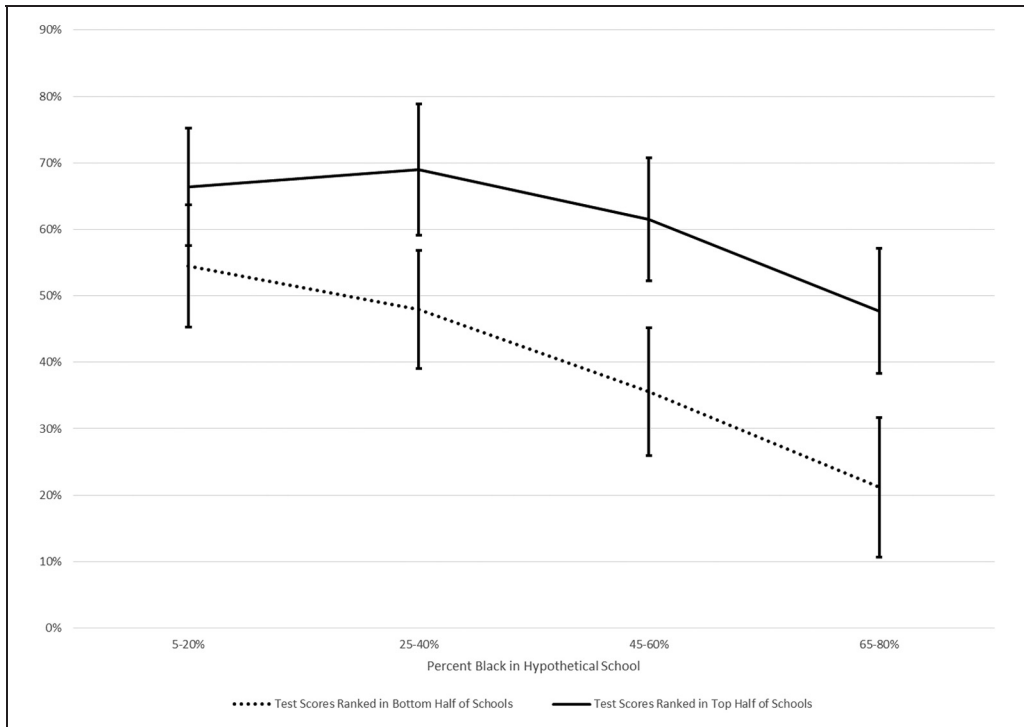


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who would enroll in hypothetical school, by school racial composition and test score rank.

Note: Figure 1 portrays the percentage of respondents presented with hypothetical characteristics who claimed they were very likely or somewhat likely to enroll their children in those schools. The solid line represents respondents who were told the school was ranked 1st through 5th out of 10 schools on student standardized test scores; the dotted line represents respondents who were told the school was ranked 6th through 10th out of 10. Data come from the Race, Racial Attitudes, and School Segregation Survey. Data are unweighted. Error bars represent 95 percent confidence intervals of the proportion of respondents who would enroll. $N = 862$.

enroll their children in the schools described to them, broken down by whether they were told that the hypothetical school was in the top or bottom half of the test-score distribution (i.e., ranked 1st through 5th out of 10 schools or ranked 6th through 10th).

As the figure illustrates, there is a relatively steady downward trend in the likelihood of enrollment as the proportion of black students rises, irrespective of the school's academic record. For both high- and low-performing schools, respondents were less likely to enroll in schools that had higher concentrations of black students. White respondents were least likely to say they would enroll in low-performing schools with heavy black enrollment; on average, just over one in five claimed they were likely to enroll in a school in the bottom half of the test score distribution when over 60

percent of the school's students were black. By contrast, more than half would opt to enroll in a low-performing school whose proportion of black students was 20 percent or less. Respondents were most likely to enroll in high-performing schools with relatively few black students.

Figure 1 demonstrates that a school's racial composition plays an important role in influencing parents' educational choices, lending support to the pure race hypothesis. Table 2 expands our investigation of the pure race and racial proxy hypotheses, presenting results from binary logistic regression analyses that allow us to examine these competing perspectives as well as the role that racial attitudes play in these processes.

The first model of Table 2 portrays the effects of school racial composition and the three racial

Table 2. Coefficients from Logistic Regression Predicting Enrollment in Hypothetical School.

| | Model 1 <i>b</i> | Model 2 <i>b</i> | Model 3 <i>b</i> |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Percentage black in school enrollment | -0.017*** (0.003) | -0.017*** (0.003) | -0.014*** (0.003) |
| School rank in student test scores | -0.235*** (0.028) | -0.246*** (0.029) | -0.254*** (0.031) |
| Years since last school renovation | -0.026** (0.009) | -0.026** (0.009) | -0.029** (0.010) |
| Heightened security in school | -0.778*** (0.155) | -0.791*** (0.157) | -0.847*** (0.170) |
| Scale of white superiority attitudes | | -0.106** (0.033) | -0.065 (0.100) |
| School percentage black × white superiority scale | | | -0.003* (0.002) |
| Test rank × white superiority scale | | | 0.010 (0.012) |
| Renovation years × white superiority scale | | | 0.002 (0.004) |
| Heightened security × white superiority scale | | | 0.037 (0.067) |
| Constant | 2.552*** (0.457) | 2.663*** (0.462) | 2.676*** (0.478) |
| -2 log likelihood | 1,015.814 | 1,004.801 | 998.544 |
| Nagelkerke R ² | 0.249 | 0.263 | 0.271 |
| N | 862 | 862 | 862 |

Note: Table 2 presents results from binary logistic regression models predicting the odds that a respondent would choose to enroll his or her child in the hypothetical school described in the vignette. All models also control for respondent's number of children enrolled in public school, number of children enrolled in private school, number of homeschooled children, and number of children not enrolled in school, as well as gender, income, education, and region. Data come from the Race, Racial Attitudes, and School Segregation Survey. Data are unweighted. Standard errors in parentheses.

****p* < .001. ***p* < .01. **p* < .05.

proxy measures on the odds of enrollment. To find support for the racial proxy prediction, the racial proxy measures would have significant effects on enrollment preferences and the effect of school racial composition would be statistically nonsignificant. By contrast, if school racial composition has a significant negative effect on the odds of enrollment net of any effects of the proxy measures, this finding would support the pure race prediction.

Model 1 supports the pure race prediction. Each racial proxy measure had a significant effect on the likelihood of enrollment, but so did the school racial composition variable. Every percentage point increase in black enrollment in the hypothetical school was associated with a 1.7 percent reduction in the odds of enrollment ($e^{-0.017} = .983$). For their part, the proxy measures affected

enrollment likelihood in the expected directions, lending partial support to the racial proxy argument. As the hypothetical school fell in its academic ranking, so too did the likelihood that respondents would choose to enroll their children. Controlling for the other school characteristics, for every rank-order position that a school fell, the odds of a respondent's enrollment declined by 20.9 percent ($e^{-.235} = .791$). School facilities mattered as well. Respondents were less likely to consider enrolling their children in schools that had gone a longer period of time since updating their classrooms, laboratories, and auditoriums. Each additional year since the last renovation corresponded to a 2.6 percent decrease in the odds of enrollment ($e^{-.026} = .974$). Finally, participants responded strongly to the security measure in the vignette. Compared to the hypothetical school in

which respondents were told that they must simply sign in at the front desk, the odds of enrolling in the hypothetical school in which respondents were told they must pass a security guard, cross through a metal detector, and have their bags searched were 54.1 percent lower ($e^{-.778} = .459$). However, even when controlling for these factors, parents reacted more negatively toward schools with more black students than to schools with lower proportions of black students.

Parents take many factors into consideration when selecting a school for their children, and the factors for which race often stands as a proxy are certainly important school characteristics that do and should influence parental preference. Their effects must be understood, however, alongside the demonstrated importance that the racial composition of the student body has on the school selection process for white parents. Having found little support for the idea that a school's racial characteristics affect parental choice merely by signaling the presence of other, ostensibly nonracial, undesirable characteristics, it is important to consider further why and how race matters—that is, what the mechanisms are behind the link between racial composition and likelihood of enrollment. If a pure race explanation is sufficient, expressions of anti-black animus or white superiority should influence the likelihood of enrollment, and this effect should be exaggerated as the proportion of black students at a hypothetical school grows.

Model 2 in Table 2, which incorporates respondents' scores on the white superiority scale as a predictor, begins to delve into this possibility. Model 2 shows that racial stereotypes do have an impact on school choice behavior. Respondents who rated whites more highly than blacks across the presented array of traits tended to be less likely to enroll in any hypothetical school presented to them. Looking further, if the pure race explanation is correct, we would also expect pro-white (or anti-black) bias to be an especially potent predictor of enrollment choice in schools where the percentage of black students is higher. Similarly, we would expect the effect of such racial attitudes not to vary significantly by school test scores, the condition of facilities, or the presence or absence of heightened security. To examine these possibilities, we ran a model with the addition of interactions between the pro-white racial attitudes scale and school percentage black, test score rank, renovation years, and heightened security. Model 3 of Table 2 shows these results.

Model 3 adds further support to the pure race explanation of parental school choice. Specifically, the racial stereotypes by school composition interaction has a negative and significant effect, indicating that the tendency to avoid enrolling in schools with a higher proportion of black students is particularly pronounced among respondents who demonstrate a stronger pro-white (anti-black) bias. Furthermore, as expected, the other included interactions are nonsignificant, reinforcing the notion that racial bias is in fact primarily responsive to the racial composition of schools rather than to other school characteristics.

This racial attitudes effect is further illustrated in Figure 2, which portrays the predicted probability that a respondent will opt to enroll in hypothetical schools of varying racial composition (derived from the results in Model 3 of Table 2). The solid line in Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of enrollment for a respondent in the 10th percentile of the racial attitudes distribution (a value of 0 on the white superiority scale, indicating a person claiming no differences between blacks and whites); the dotted line shows the predicted probability of enrollment for a respondent in the 90th percentile (a value of 4 on that scale). All white parents, on average, responded negatively to an increase in the proportion of black students in a hypothetical school's student body, but respondents who expressed higher pro-white sentiment show a much steeper downward slope in their reaction to changing racial composition. For a school with average test scores, average facilities, a heightened security apparatus, and in which 80 percent of students were African American, the probability that a white respondent, even one who did not express pro-white attitudes, would enroll in the school was below 50 percent; for a respondent with pro-white attitudes in the 90th percentile, the probability of enrolling in that same school was under 25 percent.

These findings bolster the argument that the effect of racial composition is at least in part an outgrowth of pro-white or anti-black sentiment as opposed to concerns about school quality, safety, and other factors ostensibly related to the presence of African American students. More generally, our findings demonstrate the power and utility of incorporating measures of racial attitudes into sociological research on racial segregation to more fully capture and demonstrate the social psychological mechanisms linking social conditions, decision making, and resulting social structures.

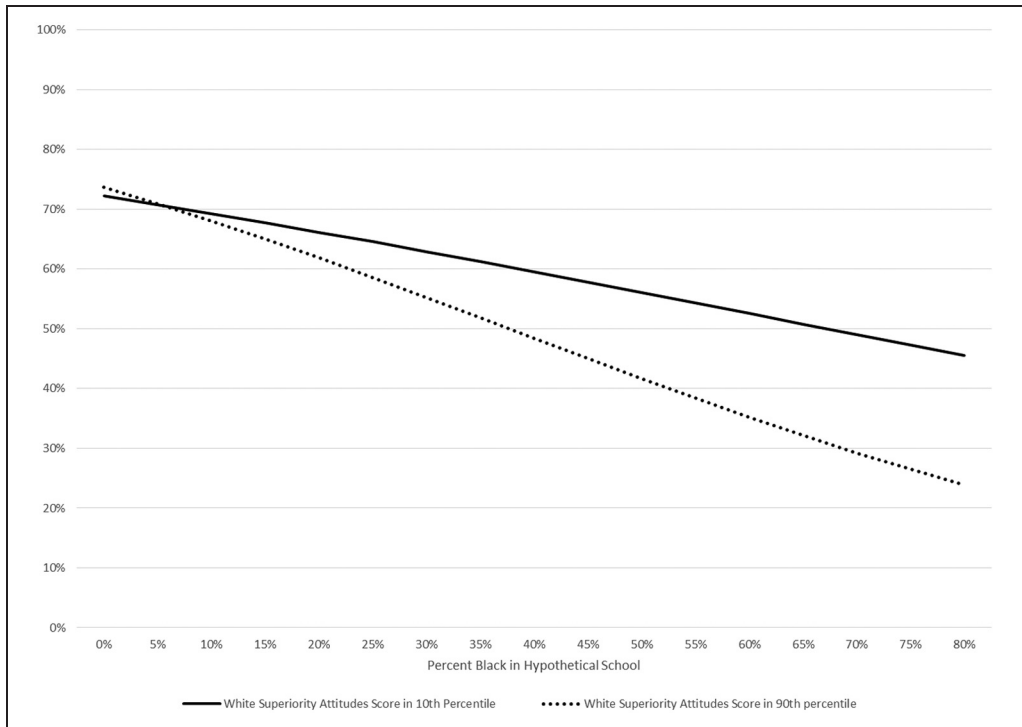


Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of enrollment in hypothetical school.

Note: Figure 2 portrays predicted probabilities of enrollment in the hypothetical school at varying levels of black student representation, drawn from the logistic regression results presented in Table 2, Model 3. The solid line represents respondents scoring in the 10th percentile on the white superiority attitudes scale (i.e., displaying a score of 0). The dotted line represents respondents scoring in the 90th percentile on this scale (i.e., displaying a score of 4). Other predictors are set at their median or modal values. Data come from the Race, Racial Attitudes, and School Segregation survey. Data are unweighted. N = 862.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many factors come into play as parents negotiate their local educational landscape and strive when possible to choose the highest quality and most suitable school for their children. The persistent trend of racial and ethnic segregation in schools suggests, though, that the racial composition of schools' student bodies plays a salient role in parents' selection of the most appropriate school, particularly among white parents. Given the intractable reality of racial and ethnic segregation in schools and the unequal school quality that tends to map onto these racial and ethnic divisions, it is important to gain further insights into the mechanisms perpetuating segregation and inequality in U.S. schools. As prior studies as well as the analyses presented here indicate, when given a choice over their children's

educational experience, white parents tend to select schools with lower proportions of African American students, and they tend to avoid schools with black majorities in the student body. Is this avoidance due directly to a sense of black inferiority or a straightforward desire to have their children educated in a whiter environment? Or do white parents use race as a proxy that stands as a signal of academic quality, school safety, and the suitability of educational facilities?

In this article, we sought to address the "pure race" versus "racial proxy" question by utilizing a new data set based on a survey that used an experimental design to investigate the factors influencing parental choice. By systematically varying the racial composition of a hypothetical school as well as other characteristics for which race is presumed to serve as a proxy, we were able to isolate the effect of school racial

demography on the likelihood of enrollment. We found that race matters a great deal in school selection. It is important to note that the components we selected as “racial proxy” measures all have significant independent effects on the likelihood of school enrollment—parents responded negatively to schools with lower test scores, schools that had not been renovated recently, and schools that displayed a severe security apparatus. Even so, as previous research (e.g., Emerson et al. 2001) has found with regard to neighborhood preferences, these proxy factors exist alongside the clear effect of racial composition on the likelihood of white parents sending their children to a school. Controlling for all three proxy measures, we find that the likelihood that white parents will choose a hypothetical school for their children drops significantly as the proportion of black students in the student body increases. Race matters in white parents’ school selection, and as the racial attitudes measures show, its effect is especially salient for white parents who hold explicit pro-white or anti-black views. Parents who believe that whites tend to be superior to blacks have a stronger negative reaction to an increase in African American students than do their peers who do not harbor such attitudes.

Several limitations to the research design and analysis should be noted. First, we did not collect a random sample, and our sample is not perfectly representative of the U.S. population. In particular, highly educated and wealthier respondents were overrepresented in the sample. To the extent that highly educated whites were overrepresented, the level of support for the hypothetical public schools presented in the vignette may have been inflated as research shows that college-educated and higher-income whites tend to demonstrate higher levels of political support, on average, for public education in the United States (Berkman and Plutzer 2005). Second, the experiment was hypothetical and not necessarily reflective of the realities that parents face in their attempts to find schools for their children. We deliberately constrained respondents’ freedom of choice—they were presented with one and only one public school and told they must select it or face a more arduous educational process, such as paying for private school or homeschooling. This does in fact reflect the reality many parents face when they are assigned to one local public school on the basis of their geographic location. But in an era when districts nationwide are expanding parental choice, it

does not match the more diverse menu of schooling options parents increasingly enjoy. Whether their options are limited to opting in or out of a pre-assigned public school—the choice given to our respondents—or selecting among a vast array of traditional public, alternative, magnet, and charter schools while also maintaining the exit option, parents must make choices regarding where and how their children will be educated. The factors parents take into account when evaluating individual schools vary, and examination of other variables not included in the current study may shed further light on what matters most in the school choice process. Even so, previous research demonstrates that race plays a major role in influencing the preferences of white parents. School districts’ student assignment policies are certainly evolving nationwide to incorporate a greater degree of parental choice; if anything, though, school districts’ increasing reliance on parental input makes our findings about the persistent impact of racial composition on parents’ evaluations of schools arguably more salient than they would be under a strict geographically based student assignment system.

Similarly, we deliberately constrained the amount of information respondents were given about each hypothetical school, limiting the variations to four characteristics for the sake of parsimonious analysis. In reality, of course, savvy parents take into account a wide range of factors when searching for the optimal school for their children—indeed, the ability and willingness to seek out and critically evaluate many pieces of information about schools when making a choice serves as an important mechanism in the perpetuation of educational inequality between parents with different levels of financial and cultural capital in districts with extensive freedom of choice. In particular, it is important to note the absence of information about the hypothetical school’s socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., the social class background of the student body), which often influences parents’ evaluations of local schools (see Posey-Maddox 2014). Future research may shed more light on these issues by experimenting with alternative proxy variables or incorporating alternative school selection methods, such as scenarios in which respondents are presented with multiple schools with varying characteristics and asked to choose which school they prefer.

To minimize small cell counts and optimize the efficiency and parsimony of the study, we

randomly varied the racial composition of schools only by manipulating the black and white proportions of the student body, keeping the Asian and Hispanic proportions at a constant and relatively low value. However, as schools in urban and suburban districts become increasingly diverse, schools with low Asian and Hispanic enrollment are less common, and Hispanic students now comprise a majority in many urban districts nationwide (Billingham forthcoming). We chose to focus on black and white students in this research in line with the prevailing tradition in housing research on which our experiment was modeled. Previous research demonstrates that white parents respond most strongly to African Americans in their choice behavior, and the history of conflicts over racial segregation in U.S. schools largely focuses on the persistent segregation of white students from black students. Still, as U.S. schools become more diverse, it will be imperative to augment our understanding of how parents from different racial and ethnic backgrounds respond to the complex demographic composition of local schools; an experimental method like the one used here can serve as a model for such future research.

We must also acknowledge that individuals' behavior in the real world may not always neatly reflect the attitudes they convey on a survey. When considering the links between parents' preferences expressed in an online survey and their actual enrollment choices, appropriate cautions are warranted. Nonetheless, compelling evidence supports the assertion that attitudes are directly relevant to behavior (Bobo et al. 2012; Schuman 1995). Furthermore, we agree with Bobo and colleagues (2012:71) that the study of racial attitudes is "important in its own right" and "it is of vital sociological utility to know what basic principles guiding race relations people assume [and] their willingness to enter situations with varying racial mixtures in different domains of life." Our research speaks directly to these questions and thus contributes important knowledge to current understandings of the racial climate of the United States.

As our study demonstrates, race still matters in attitudes toward schools in the United States. Patterns of racial segregation reflect, among other factors, self-selection (particularly among white families) into more homogeneous schools. To the extent that white parents use racial composition as a criterion in their evaluation of potential schools for their children, our findings suggest that augmenting parental freedom of choice will

likely exacerbate the pattern of increased racial segregation already taking place in many school districts as white parents seek out schools with fewer black students. Moreover, to the extent that black students continue to be stigmatized and avoided, white families' race-based school choices may contribute to decades-long legacies of mistreatment of African Americans in U.S. educational systems—in Dumas's (2014:20) words, "the *longue durée* of black suffering in schools." Given the constraints school districts face (largely as a result of the Supreme Court's decisions in *Milliken v. Bradley* and *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*) in using race as a factor in devising student assignment policies, school districts are limited in their ability to counteract these types of social closure practices on the part of white parents.

The results presented here do suggest some hopeful strategies for districts striving to pursue integration. The effects of the racial proxy variables in Table 2 suggest that making improvements to schools can counteract white parents' racial prejudices. Providing substantial renovations to school facilities, improving test scores, and finding ways to reduce the overt presence of intimidating security measures without sacrificing student safety will not eliminate all white parents' reluctance to enrolling their children in majority-black schools, but these measures will soften that reluctance among many, thereby promoting greater racial and ethnic integration. The results presented here also indicate that anxiety about heavily black schools is heightened among parents who believe that whites tend to be superior to blacks on a range of characteristics. Programs designed to promote cross-cultural understanding and dialogue and to reduce anti-black sentiment could, our findings suggest, contribute to a weakening of the resistance to attending more diverse schools. The persistence of racial and ethnic segregation in U.S. schools is due to many structural factors, but we have demonstrated that social psychological factors contribute significantly to the continued difficulty that municipalities and school districts face in their efforts to reduce segregation.

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NOTES

1. More information on SurveyMonkey Audience (SMA) is available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/audience/>.
2. We do not know how many people were invited by SMA and chose not to participate, but of the 1,479 respondents who initially agreed to participate, 123 were disqualified—103 because they dropped out after reading an informed consent document outlining the content of the survey and 20 because they identified as white in one of the non-white samples (see note 5). An additional 97 respondents began the survey but failed to complete it.
3. The example provided by Simmons and Bobo (2015) is particularly relevant. In their comparisons of the factors predicting outcomes on various measures of racial attitudes in both face-to-face, full probability sample (FPS) and web-based, non-full probability sample (NPS) surveys, they found that even though there were some noteworthy differences in sample composition, parallel regression models across various survey methodologies tended to yield comparable results. Simmons and Bobo (2015:381) concluded that while it is important to remain cautious about the various ways sample characteristics tend to differ, “the data generated by NPS Web surveys are in many ways comparable to data from FPS face-to-face surveys, and they thus have a place in the social science toolkit.”
4. We did not specifically ask about the age of respondents’ children, but only respondents with children under age 18 were allowed to participate.
5. In tailoring the audience they target, SMA strives to achieve samples that reflect the U.S. population in terms of age, gender, and race/ethnicity. The company also allows targeting of specific groups. Because we requested that our sample be limited to parents with children under age 18, SMA was not able to guarantee that the sample would be representative in terms of the other criteria. The initial sample recruited by SMA was thus disproportionately white. To produce a more racially and ethnically diverse sample, SMA recruited three other small samples that were limited to non-white respondents. Still, the number of respondents from each racial/ethnic background, except for whites, was relatively small, limiting our ability to generate reliable cross-race

comparisons. Analyses involving respondents from all racial/ethnic groups combined yielded results similar to those reported here; these analyses are available from the authors upon request.

6. To simplify interpretations, we converted these three-year increments into one-year increments in the results that follow.
7. To simplify interpretations, we converted these five-point increments into one-point increments in the results that follow.
8. For each dimension, we asked respondents the following questions: “Where would you rate blacks on this scale [1–7]? Do most blacks tend to be [unintelligent/violent/lazy/untrustworthy] or tend to be [intelligent/peaceful/hardworking/trustworthy]? Where would you rate whites on this scale [1–7]? Do most whites tend to be [unintelligent/violent/lazy/untrustworthy] or tend to be [intelligent/peaceful/hardworking/trustworthy]?”
9. We also examined effects of gender, household income (five categories ranging from less than \$25,000 to \$150,000 or above), education (five categories ranging from less than high school to graduate degree), and children’s schooling situations (number of homeschooled children, number enrolled in public school, and number enrolled in private school). As expected, based on our research design, which randomly assigned scores on the main independent variables, these other variables had no bearing on the primary associations of interest. As noted in Table 2, our final presented models include but do not portray the results for these controls.

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