

Who's for segregation today?

Ludi Simpson

Why does race segregation persistently get a hearing in the media? Politicians regularly wheel it out as a concern, and the BBC is not alone in encouraging programmes and stories that pose problematic 'segregation' as the opposite of desirable 'integration'. One reason for the persistence of the story is that the measurement of residential patterns is designed to always show segregation.

All the segregation indices that I know of (with names including dissimilarity, entropy, isolation, clustering, ...) are at their minimum when the groups that are being compared are spread exactly evenly across residential areas. The indices compare the proportion of a group's city total that is in a neighbourhood, with the proportion of other group's city total in that neighbourhood, and any difference contributes to the index. Since groups are always distributed across neighbourhoods differently, there is always a degree of segregation. This means that when posed as a problem, residential segregation is a problem that will never go away. Perhaps that is why it seems that it can so dependably be wheeled out to stir up political debate and anxiety.

There are other reasons why segregation indices are unsatisfactory. First, there is no standard against which measures of segregation can be measured. The national value of segregation is not the average of city values, for example, nor anything like it. Usually, the national value of a segregation index is higher than local values, because neighbourhoods are more alike within the same city. Again, the only standard is zero, no unevenness at all.

Second, one cannot fairly compare the values of race segregation indices from two cities. The values depend on the boundary of the city and the boundaries of the neighbourhoods within it. So for example the almost-entirely urban Leicester and Manchester local authorities will be less segregated than Bradford, simply because Bradford has a wider boundary that includes mainly white rural areas around it. In a similar way, if the neighbourhood boundaries have been revised to respect socially-formed neighbourhoods (as is the case with electoral wards), then they will affect the segregation values too.

I would not write off segregation indices altogether. If the same area boundaries are used, they can be fairly used to compare the geographical distribution of different social groups, and to compare change over time. Danny Dorling and Phil Rees (2003) used them to show that ethnic minorities' uneven spread through the wards of Britain (what they called 'polarisation' in a study of inequalities), changed little from 1971 to 2001 with index values between 30% and 70% depending on the group. These values were lower than the 'segregation' of Scotland-born and Wales-born (between 70% and 80%), but higher than for unemployed, tenure, or social economic class categories (less than 30%, but generally increasing 1971-2001). Sex and age are most evenly spread across Britain, although young adults aged 18-29 sort themselves for study and work to be twice as 'segregated' as other age groups (10-15% rather than around 5%). Values of residential segregation for ethnic group are relatively high because immigrants settle in particular areas in response to the labour and housing markets. Clustering of this sort also leads to support from others with similar language and experience: a help rather than a hindrance to integration within the rigours of life in Britain.

It has been proposed in all seriousness that anyone in the majority population should have the right to live in a neighbourhood in which they are the majority. That's a version of the zero segregation 'solution'. Another way of achieving the 'right' is to draw our neighbourhood around our own two feet. That way we'll always be in the majority.

Yes, this is getting silly. A better approach is to define and address real social problems.

The characteristics of segregation indices are well known, summarised for example in the final three references below. That they are used so frequently suggests that it would be wrong to blame the indices themselves for persistent media interest in segregation. The interest is a political one, and the fear of racial and cultural diversity is persistent, if rather unhelpful for social policy. The measures can, however, be seen as convenient expressions of that interest and fear.

The formal technical measures of residential segregation are what they are. The use of them in a policy or political context to indicate a problem begs justification and can and should be challenged.

References

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Ludi Simpson, University of Manchester

Ludi.Simpson@manchester.ac.uk