

The Impact of Desegregation on White Public School Enrollment in the U.S. Nonmetro South, 1960–1990*

Cynthia M. Cready, *Texas A&M University*

Mark A. Fossett, *Texas A&M University*

Objective. This paper assesses white responses to public school desegregation in the U.S. nonmetro South. *Methods.* Using census data, we examined trends in white public school enrollment from 1960 to 1990 for a random sample of southern nonmetro counties and also for a comparison sample of nonsouthern counties. *Results.* In the southern sample, we find that the average percentage of white elementary and secondary students enrolled in public schools declined steadily during the 1960s and 1970s—as desegregation progressed—and stabilizes during the 1980s. Declines from 1960 to 1980 are greatest in those counties with relatively large black populations. Declines in white public school enrollment were slight in counties with relatively small black populations and are not observed for the non-southern (“control”) sample. *Conclusions.* Findings suggest that in the black-belt counties of the rural South, whites tended to respond to the changes in resource allocation and racial contact implied by public school desegregation by withdrawing from public schools and enrolling in private ones.

Public school desegregation fundamentally altered the provision of education in the South. Prior to desegregation, public school education was provided by a dual system in which black and white students were required by law to attend separate schools. In principle, facilities were “separate-but-equal”; in practice, black schools received fewer resources per student than white schools. In black schools, teacher salaries were lower, school terms were shorter, and class sizes were larger. Racial inequalities in school resources were greatest in counties with relatively large black populations (Harlan, 1958; Margo, 1990). State-level funds were usually allocated to

*Direct all correspondence to Cynthia M. Cready, Department of Sociology, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843-4351. We thank Jim Burk, Bob Calvert, Bill Cready, Steve Murdock, the editor, and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments. Data for the analyses were taken from published census tabulations. For replication purposes, the data can be obtained by writing to the first author at the above address. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 60th annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society, August 13–17, 1997, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Editor's note: The Reviewers were Robert E. England, Barrett A. Lee, Charles S. Bullock III, and Craig St. John.

local school boards on the basis of the total number of students (white and black combined) enrolled in public schools. Consequently, white-controlled school boards in black-belt counties generally had more money to spend per white student than those in predominantly white counties (Harlan, 1958:16-19).

The advantages enjoyed by white public school students in black-belt counties were threatened by desegregation. With desegregation, education became a more "public" public good. Whites were forced to share resources more equally with blacks. In addition, desegregation increased contact between the races as "equals."

Desegregation increased the attractiveness of private schools as an alternative to public schools for black-belt whites. For many of these whites, transferring their children to suburban or other public school districts was not a viable option. Racially segregated private education was the major, in many cases the *only*, feasible alternative to racially integrated public education.

The consequences of this scenario are documented in numerous case studies (see Cleghorn, 1970; Minor, 1970; Orfield, 1969). For example, soon after receiving orders to desegregate in 1959, whites in predominantly black rural Prince Edward County, Virginia, closed the county's public schools, sent their children to a newly organized private school, and left black children in the county without access to educational facilities for several years. In Lowndes County, Alabama, where blacks outnumbered whites four to one, whites also deserted the public schools soon after blacks were admitted in the mid-1960s. Whites in Mississippi's rural black-belt counties responded similarly to Supreme Court demands in its 1969 *Alexander* decision to integrate their schools "at once" (396 U.S. 19); only about 10 percent of the white students enrolled in Amite County public schools and less than 1 percent of those enrolled in Wilkinson County public schools prior to the implementation of Court demands returned in 1970. As one local white official put it: "If the federal courts want to operate the schools, then let them operate them . . . we're going to turn them over to the blacks" (cited in Minor, 1970:33). The legacy of such early white responses to public school desegregation is still evident today in some black-belt counties (see Cooper, 1994).

These examples suggest the hypothesis that "segregation academies" (Cleghorn, 1970) were especially likely to appear in communities with relatively large black populations. This hypothesis is consistent with findings of negative associations between black concentration and white withdrawal from public schools in nonmetro areas as well as metro areas and in the South and other regions of the country (e.g., Coleman, Kelley, and Moore, 1975; Conlon and Kimenyi, 1991; Clotfelter, 1976; Farley, Wurdock, and Richards, 1980; Giles, 1978; Giles, Cataldo, and Gatlin, 1975; Munford, 1973; Welch, 1987; Wilson, 1985).

We extend these earlier studies in two ways. First, we examine the impact of desegregation on white public school enrollment in nonmetro areas. Most previous work has focused on metro areas. The few studies of nonmetro areas have been case studies or comparative analyses based on small, geographically restricted samples (e.g., a subset of school districts in a single state). One advantage of focusing on nonmetro areas is that assessments of white responses to public school desegregation are less ambiguous in these areas than in metro areas. In metro areas, the interpretation of white movement from central city to suburban school districts as a white response to desegregation is complicated because white suburbanization has been and is fueled by many factors. Thus, a "baseline" model of suburbanization must be developed before it is possible to judge how much white movement is because of desegregation as opposed to other factors (Lieberson, 1985). In nonmetro areas, this concern is not relevant because it is not feasible for most whites in these areas to relocate to a new school district to avoid sending their children to school with blacks; for instance, a substantial number of southern, nonmetro counties have only one public school system.¹ Indeed, one of the few ways rural whites can avoid sending their children to school with blacks is to send them to private schools.

The second way we extend previous research is by examining trends in white public school enrollment from 1960 to 1990. By starting with 1960, we are able to document the onset of white movement out of public schools in the rural South; white enrollment in private schools was rare in the region at that time. Then, by following a sample of southern nonmetro counties (and a comparison sample of nonsouthern nonmetro counties) *over three decades to 1990*, we are able to (a) document the emergence of a new pattern of white public school enrollment, (b) trace the persistence of this new pattern over time, and (c) show the relevance of past changes to contemporary patterns of white public school enrollment. Previous studies have covered shorter time periods and to our knowledge none have followed trends to 1990.

Hypotheses

We make two predictions. First, we expect the percentage of white students enrolled in public schools in the southern sample to decrease following desegregation. Prior to the mid-1960s most white and black students in the nonmetro South attended segregated public schools (Metcalfe, 1983:3; Orfield, 1969:20). Desegregation in the region occurred during the late 1960s and the 1970s. Thus, in the southern sample, we expect the percentage of white students enrolled in public schools to drop steadily

¹In our sample, for example, over one half of the counties had only one public school system in most decades.

from 1960 to 1980 as desegregation progressed. We do not expect to observe such a decline in the predominantly white nonsouthern, or "control," sample.

Second, we predict that declines in white public school enrollment will be greatest in counties with relatively large black populations. Hence, post-1960, we expect to observe a negative association between white public school enrollment and the percentage of the county population that is black. We do not expect to observe such an association in 1960.

Data and Methods

Data Sources and Samples. We developed all of the measures from data drawn from published census tabulations for 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1963, 1973, 1982, 1983, 1992, 1993). We use two samples. The *southern* sample consists of 303 counties drawn randomly (without replacement) from the 1,046 nonmetro counties in the census South in 1980.² We dropped 37 counties from the sample for the analyses. We dropped nine counties because they were included in metro areas in 1990. We dropped twenty-four counties with significant nonblack minority populations (e.g., Native Americans, Hispanics) because school enrollment data were not tabulated separately for these groups in all decades.³ We dropped an additional three counties because black school enrollment data were missing for them in 1990. We dropped one additional county because of unusually large growth in the black population from 1960 to 1970.⁴ The final sample of 266 counties is generally representative of southern, nonmetro areas with primarily white-black racial/ethnic group structures; it is *not* representative of those with more complex racial/ethnic group structures (e.g., areas with substantial numbers of Hispanics or non-black nonwhites).

The *nonsouthern*, or "control," sample consists of 125 randomly selected counties representative of those nonmetro areas outside the census South with predominantly white, non-Hispanic populations in 1990.⁵ As requisite

²The census South includes Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

³A county was dropped if over 25 percent of its nonwhite population (excluding Hispanics who reported "other" as their race) was *not* black but part of some other nonwhite racial group (e.g., Native Americans) and/or the Hispanic share of its population exceeded 20 percent.

⁴This growth appears to be due to the establishment of some kind of youth facility. In 1980, about 70 percent of Union County, Kentucky's black residents were aged 15-24 and about 64 percent of the county's black residents were residing in group quarters. These percentages were much lower in 1960.

⁵Neither nonwhites nor Hispanics are more than 5 percent of the population of the counties included in this sample.

data were unavailable for four of the counties in the sample, the final sample size is 121 for the nonsouthern analyses.

Dependent Variable. Our dependent variable is the percentage of white students in grades 1–12 enrolled in public schools. For the regression analyses, we subjected this variable to a logit or log-odds transformation, specifically: $\ln(E_{\text{public}}/E_{\text{private}})$, where \ln is the natural log, E_{public} is number of white elementary and secondary students in the county enrolled in public schools, and E_{private} is the number of such students in the county enrolled in private schools.⁶ It is standard practice to use this transformation with a percentage since use of the untransformed variable, which has a bounded range of 0–100, leads to violations of the equal-variance assumption of regression (see Hamilton, 1992). In addition, use of the percentage may yield implausible predicted values (i.e., outside the range of 0–100).

Independent and Control Variables. Percent black in the county and the interaction of percent black with time (i.e., 1960 v post-1960) are the key independent variables in our analyses. Control variables include a measure of inequality in the white family income distribution for the county (i.e., the Gini coefficient, given by Murdock and Ellis, 1991:145), the natural log of median family income for white families in the county, and the natural log of the size of the white population in the county. The three control variables capture different aspects of the viability of private education in the county. All are predicted to have negative effects on white public school enrollment.⁷

Method. We assessed the effects of the independent and control variables on white public school enrollment by estimating separate regression models for the southern and nonsouthern samples.⁸ We report ordinary least squares (OLS) regression parameter estimates and significance tests. We confirmed the OLS parameter estimates and significance tests by using generalized least squares, robust, and bootstrap techniques.

⁶ We added a value of 1 to the denominator so that the logit would be defined for counties with no private school enrollment. In 1960, about 19.5 percent of the counties in the southern sample had no private school enrollment. In 1990, none of the counties in the southern sample had no private school enrollment. Corresponding 1960 and 1990 figures for the nonsouthern sample are 18.2 percent and 7.4 percent, respectively.

⁷ We also examined the effects of a three-way interaction between time, percent black, and whether or not there was more than one public school system in the county (obtained from published census tabulations for 1957, 1967, 1977, and 1987 [U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1959, 1968, 1978, 1988]) on white public school enrollment. We did not include the interaction in final analyses because its effects were not statistically significant. Results from supplementary regression analyses (not shown) on the subset of counties with only one public school system in every decade from 1960 to 1990 support this decision; the effects of the independent and control variables do not differ appreciably from those reported based on the full sample.

⁸ Control variables are “centered” on their sample medians for the regression analyses.

Results

Descriptive Analyses. Table 1 presents means and standard deviations (SD) for the dependent variable by decade and sample. Of particular interest is the sizable, continuous *decline* in white public school enrollment in the nonmetro South from 1960 to 1980. In 1960 the percentage of white students in grades 1–12 enrolled in public schools in the “average” southern, nonmetro county is 98.2. In 1970, this percentage is 94.0, and by 1980, has dropped nearly ten points to 88.3. In 1990, however, it is 89.0. Thus, after falling steadily over the 1960s and 1970s, the two decades in which the bulk of desegregation occurred, white public school enrollment in the rural South appears to have stabilized in the 1980s.

The trend is just the opposite in the nonsouthern, or “control,” sample. That is, instead of decreasing from 1960 to 1980 as it does in the South,

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics for Two Samples of U.S. Nonmetro Counties, 1960–1990

Variable	1960	1970	1980	1990
Southern sample (N = 266)				
Percent of white students in grades 1–12 enrolled in public schools				
Mean	98.2	94.0	88.3	89.0
SD	4.1	11.1	14.1	12.5
Percent black in county				
Mean	35.1	31.8	29.6	29.2
SD	17.3	16.1	16.4	16.8
White family income inequality in county				
Mean	40.7	38.4	36.9	35.3
SD	3.5	3.0	2.8	2.3
White median family income in county				
Mean	3,818	7,154	16,374	29,028
SD	810	1,061	2,250	4,567
White population in county				
Mean	16,455	17,435	20,707	22,106
SD	12,227	12,810	15,430	17,493
Nonsouthern sample (N = 121)				
Percent of white students in grades 1–12 enrolled in public schools				
Mean	92.8	94.8	95.7	94.6
SD	9.7	7.8	5.6	5.2
White family income inequality in county				
Mean	40.0	40.0	35.6	33.6
SD	3.8	3.8	2.8	2.3
White median family income in county				
Mean	4,365	7,588	16,724	27,607
SD	882	1,315	2,676	4,750
White population in county				
Mean	18,963	19,170	21,111	21,203
SD	20,052	20,516	22,814	23,537

the percentage of white students in grades 1–12 enrolled in public schools in the “average” nonmetro county actually *increases* slightly from 92.8 to 95.7 in the nonsouth. Table 1 shows that trends in cross-area variation in white public school enrollment also differ for the two samples. In the southern sample, for example, the standard deviation for the enrollment variable jumps from 4.1 in 1960 to 14.1 in 1980, and then drops slightly to 12.5 in 1990. In contrast, the standard deviation for the enrollment variable in the nonsouthern sample drops steadily from 9.7 in 1960 to 5.2 in 1990. The increase in cross-area variation in white public school enrollment from 1960 to 1980 for the southern sample suggests that white responses to public school desegregation were not uniform across areas.

Table 1 also presents descriptive statistics for the independent and control variables by decade for the southern and nonsouthern samples. Perhaps most importantly, the table shows that secular trends in the control variables are similar across the two samples. In both samples, for example, white family income inequality in the “average” nonmetro county decreases from 1960 to 1990. Moreover, in both samples, both white median family income and white population size increase, although the increases are not as great for the nonsouthern sample.⁹ The table also shows that the decade-specific means for these variables are fairly similar across the two samples. Hence, while changing income and population patterns almost certainly affect white public school enrollment over time, such changes do not appear to account for differences in enrollment patterns between the southern and nonsouthern (“control”) samples.

Table 1 also reveals that the black share of the population in the “average” southern, nonmetro county is fairly stable over time. Although it decreases slightly from 1960 to 1990, it is roughly one third in each decade. Thus, it is unlikely that changes over time in percent black per se explain white public school enrollment declines in the rural South from 1960 to 1980.

Regression Analyses. We report the results of the OLS regression analyses for the southern sample in Table 2 (Models 1, 2, and 3). The independent variables have consistently strong effects in the predicted directions on white public school enrollment. The adjusted R^2 also increases considerably, from 0.38 in Model 1 to 0.54 in Model 2, when the effect of percent black is not constrained to be the same across time. Indeed, in 1960, *prior to desegregation*, all else equal, percent black is not associated with white public school enrollment (i.e., $b = 0.0065$, $p = 0.178$). However, after 1960 and *following public school desegregation*, percent black is negatively associated with white public school enrollment. Specifically, the estimated

⁹In 1990 dollars, the “average” increase in white median family income from 1960 to 1990 is \$12,183 for the southern sample. It is \$8,351 for the nonsouthern sample.

TABLE 2

OLS Regressions of the Log-Odds of Public versus Private School Enrollment for White Students in Grades 1–12 on Selected Community Characteristics for Two Samples of U.S. Nonmetro Counties, 1960–1990

Independent variables	Southern Sample (N = 1,064)			Nonsouthern Sample (N = 484)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 3	Model 4
Percent black	-0.0263**	0.0065	0.0206*		
Percent black * post-1960		-0.0636**			
Percent black * 1970			0.0225*		
Percent black * 1980			-0.0444**		
Percent black * 1990			-0.0541**		
Percent black squared			-0.0002		
Percent black squared * 1970			-0.0011**		
Percent black squared * 1980			-0.0004*		
Percent black squared * 1990			-0.0002		
White family income inequality	-0.1357**	-0.1169**	-0.1083**		-0.0064
Ln white median family income	-5.0993**	-2.3676**	-2.3877**		-1.1124*
Ln white population	-0.0398	-0.2805**	-0.2681**		-0.5416**
1970		1.3181**			0.5036*
1980		0.0501			0.4971*
1990		-0.0030			-0.0633
Constant	4.2259**	4.4295**	4.1917**		3.5194**
Adjusted R-squared	0.3778	0.5434	0.5601		0.1946

NOTES: Unstandardized coefficients.

* $p \leq .05$.

** $p \leq .01$.

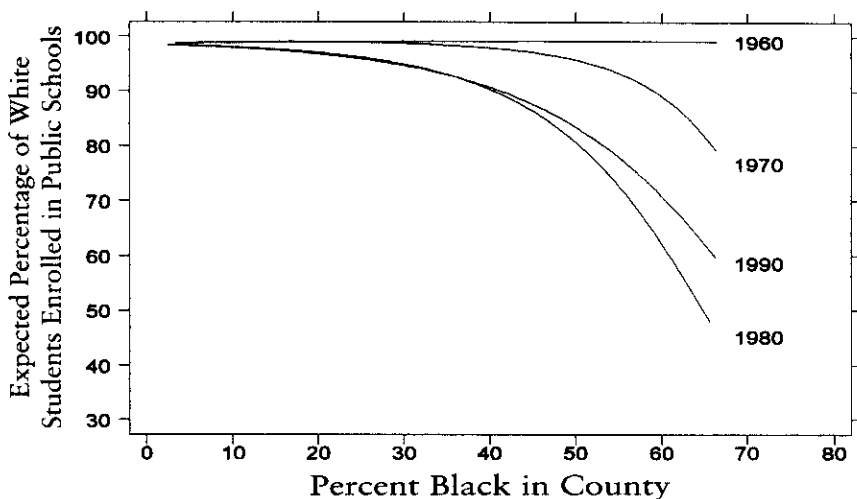
coefficient for the interaction of percent black and the dummy variable for the "post-1960" decades is -0.064 ($p \leq 0.001$).

Model 2 is a simple specification capturing the most salient aspects of percent black's effect on white public school enrollment. That is, the model indicates that percent black has no effect in 1960 and a negative effect in later decades. Model 3 is a more refined specification that allows for both nonlinearity in the effect of percent black and variation in the variable's effect across post-1960 decades. The model includes interactions of percent black and percent black squared with dummy variables for 1970, 1980, and 1990.¹⁰

Figure 1 illustrates percent black's effect under Model 3. For each decade, it shows the relationship between the expected or predicted percentage of whites enrolled in public schools and relative black population size for a "typical" county.¹¹ In 1960 the relationship is essentially zero; the predicted percentage of whites enrolled in public schools is near 98–99

FIGURE 1

Conditional Effects of Percent Black in County on the Percentage of White Students Enrolled in Public Schools, 1960–1990



¹⁰The additive terms for decade are not included in Model 3 because they are not statistically significant ($p = 0.4388$). Substantively, this means that when percent black is zero, there are no decade differences in the log-odds of white enrollment in public schools.

¹¹We estimate the expected or predicted percentages of white enrollment in public schools presented in the figure following Hamilton (1992). Since control variables are "centered" on their sample medians in the regressions, the predicted percentages of white enrollment in public schools are for a "typical" county.

regardless of percent black in the county. By 1970, however, a negative relationship emerges, as the curve dips down to lower levels of white enrollment in counties with relatively large black populations.¹² In 1980, and 1990 likewise, the relationship between white enrollment and percent black is quite negative, significantly more so than in 1970, indicating that it intensified over the 1970s and then stabilized, continuing at about the same level of intensity into 1990.¹³

To further illustrate this relationship, we examine predicted levels of white enrollment for counties grouped by relative black population size. We classify counties with 0–19, 20–39, and 40 or more percent black as “small” ($n = 86$), “moderate” ($n = 113$), and “large” ($n = 67$).¹⁴ In 1960, the average predicted percentages of white students enrolled in public schools for each of these three groups of counties are 98.9, 99.1, and 99.1, respectively. While these figures are identical for all practical purposes, corresponding figures for 1990 differ quite a bit. The average for counties with “small” black concentrations declines a mere 1.2 points to 97.7. For counties with “moderate” black concentrations, it falls a more substantial 4.6 points to 94.5. However, the most dramatic decline is observed for counties with “large” black concentrations; the average for this group drops a striking 20.0 points to 79.1.

Also as predicted, each of the three control variables is negatively associated with white public school enrollment (see Model 2 of Table 2). The impact of the variables on enrollment is substantial. For example, a one-standard-deviation increase in white family income inequality is associated with a 4.2-point decline in the percentage of white elementary and secondary students enrolled in public schools (see Roncek, 1991:515–16, on deriving percentage effects from logit coefficients). One-standard-deviation increases in median white family income and white population size are associated with similar enrollment declines (i.e., 6.6 points and 2.3 points, respectively).

Table 2 also reports results of the regression analysis for the nonsouthern, or “control,” sample (Model 4). Control variable and decade effects in this analysis closely resemble those documented in the southern sample. This resemblance is further evidence that the two samples’ fundamental difference is greater consequences of public school desegregation for whites in some areas of the South.

¹²The difference between the 1970 and 1960 curves is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$).

¹³The differences between the effect of percent black in 1970 and its effects in 1980 and 1990 are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.001$). The difference between the effect of percent black in 1980 and 1990 is not statistically significant ($p = 0.298$).

¹⁴We group counties based on percent black in 1990. The results are the same when other years are used as the reference point. The results are also essentially the same when we prepare them by using “raw” scores for the percentage of white students enrolled in public school rather than predicted values.

Conclusions

Southern public school districts faced little pressure to desegregate their schools or to distribute resources equitably among them until the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v Board of Education* (1954). In 1954, the Court outlawed *de jure* segregation and in 1955 ordered desegregation to proceed "with all deliberate speed" (*Brown v Board of Education*, 1955). Southern politicians responded to *Brown* by passing hundreds of laws and constitutional amendments designed to prevent integration (Orfield, 1969:18). Desegregation efforts were minimal. The result: A decade after *Brown*, few blacks attended school with whites. However, in the next decades, with subsequent Court decisions and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, pressures to desegregate increased significantly.

Our findings suggest that whites in the black-belt counties of the rural South tended to respond to the changes in resource allocation and racial contact implied by public school desegregation by withdrawing from the public schools and enrolling in private ones. As predicted, the average percentage of white students in grades 1–12 enrolled in public schools declines steadily from 1960 to 1980 for a random sample of southern, nonmetro counties, and declines are greatest in those counties with relatively large black populations. Moreover, we observed no such declines in white public school enrollment from 1960 to 1980 for a random sample of predominantly white counties in the rural nonsouth. To the contrary, white public school enrollment in these counties actually increases slightly during the 1960s and 1970s.

The results of this study may have implications for the interpretation of white movement from the central cities to the suburbs in metro areas during the 1960s and 1970s. It has been difficult to determine to what extent this movement was a response to public school desegregation or simply a consequence of other secular trends. Interpretation of white responses to desegregation in nonmetro areas is much less ambiguous. Private schools were the major, if not the only, viable alternative to desegregated public schools available to whites in these areas. The data we review here lend support to the argument that whites embraced this alternative to a significant degree when and where desegregation was likely to lead to high levels of white contact and sharing of resources with black students. To be sure, the percentage of white students in public schools remained relatively high (i.e., predicted declines of ten points or less) in counties with small to moderate black populations.¹⁵ However, it is important to bear in mind that blacks are disproportionately concentrated in counties where the black population is large and declines in white public school enrollment were

¹⁵Predicted declines of ten points or less are observed for 79.3 percent of the counties in our sample. If we use predicted declines of five points or less as the benchmark for white enrollment stability, only 57.8 percent of the counties in our sample experienced it.

greatest. Hence, blacks are especially vulnerable to any deleterious consequences of lower white participation in public schools.

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