

Beyond the Technical Details: Reply to St. John

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Source: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 100, No. 5 (Mar., 1995), pp. 1333-1335

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2782283>

Accessed: 21-01-2018 21:57 UTC

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BEYOND THE TECHNICAL DETAILS: REPLY TO ST. JOHN

In our article, we computed measures of black interclass segregation to examine Wilson's hypothesis that the geographic concentration of black poverty stemmed from the out-migration of nonpoor blacks from poor ghetto neighborhoods (Massey and Eggers 1990). We demonstrated that increases in income segregation among blacks were small during the 1970s and were unrelated to trends in the concentration of black poverty. For two reasons, St. John argues that this approach might not detect the movement of nonpoor blacks away from poor black neighborhoods.

First, he shows that under certain circumstances nonpoor out-migration can produce increases in some measures of interclass segregation and decreases in others, so that when average indexes are computed the changes offset one another to yield little change in the summary measure of class segregation that we used. We agree that this outcome is possible, depending on where nonpoor out-migrants from poor black neighborhoods are assumed to settle. This argument, however, does not explain why we find the same results using the affluent–poor segregation index, where there are no offsetting effects.

Second, St. John shows that under certain circumstances an increase in poverty among blacks can offset the effect of nonpoor blacks moving out, again leading to little change in our summary measure of interclass segregation. We also agree this scenario is possible, although it requires poverty rates to increase in neighborhoods where nonpoor blacks have relocated. This assumption is probably not realistic, since nonpoor movers tend to move toward higher status neighborhoods, which are less likely to bear the brunt of any increase in poverty.

In general, we concur with St. John's main point that the results we reported in "The Ecology of Inequality" cannot definitively reject Wilson's black middle-class migration hypothesis. Our findings simply add to a growing list of circumstantial evidence that is inconsistent with this view.

If black poverty concentration is caused by the out-migration of non-poor blacks from poor neighborhoods, why are levels of poverty concentration so much lower for Asians and Hispanics though their levels of income segregation are so much higher, as we reported? And why is the level of black interclass segregation in different metropolitan areas unrelated to the level of net out-migration from poor black neighborhoods, as reported in Massey, Eggers, and Denton (1994)? And why is the poverty rate across census tracts unrelated to the level of net out-migration from those tracts, as reported in Massey and Kanaiaupuni (1993)? And if nonpoor blacks are moving out of ghetto areas, where are they going? Certainly not to white areas: In metropolitan areas that experienced a sharp increase in black poverty concentration, levels of racial segregation hardly changed (Massey and Denton 1987) and black-white segregation showed no tendency to decline as income rose (Denton and Massey 1988).

The problem with all of this evidence, of course, is that it is indirect. None of it directly measures the movement of individual blacks, poor and nonpoor, in and out of specific kinds of neighborhoods. This analysis is provided elsewhere (Massey, Gross, and Shibuya 1994), and we hope that it persuades policymakers and scholars to reject the idea that non-poor blacks somehow bring misery to their former neighborhoods by moving away in an attempt to improve their own residential circumstances. We view this argument as a specious attempt to blame the victims of prejudice and discrimination for the consequences of their own victimization.

Why should the black middle class be different from the middle class of other groups? Throughout American history, upwardly mobile individuals and families have tried to improve their welfare and their opportunities by moving to better neighborhoods, but racial segregation has closed this avenue of advancement to aspiring African-Americans.

As a result, middle-class blacks have been less able to achieve improved neighborhood conditions than middle class members of other groups, and poor blacks have been forced to endure concentrations of poverty that are unparalleled. Rather than blaming middle-class blacks for the emergence of the urban underclass, scholars and policymakers should work to open up housing markets and give African-Americans access to one of the most important avenues of upward socioeconomic mobility the country has to offer.

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