Racial segregation in our cities is no accident—it’s the result of intentional public policy.

Richard Rothstein

When the unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was killed by a white Ferguson, Missouri, police officer in August, many otherwise well-informed people were surprised to learn that conditions in this St. Louis County suburb resembled the stereotype of an urban ghetto.

Ferguson schools, for example, are 85 percent black, and 83 percent of their students receive free or subsidized lunches. Student achievement is abysmal: The state of Missouri deems only 30 percent of Ferguson’s 6th and 7th graders to be proficient in math, and only 25 percent to be proficient in reading, about half the statewide average. Only 14 percent of young adults in Ferguson have bachelor’s degrees, compared with 35 percent nationwide. As of the late ’00s, 18 percent of Ferguson’s households depended on food stamps compared with 12 percent statewide; the town’s median household income was only $37,000, 80 percent of the statewide median. Half of Ferguson’s homes are now under water, with mortgage balances exceeding the homes’ total value.

In the May 2013 issue of Educational Leadership, I wrote that few children
can succeed in a highly segregated and impoverished community like this, no matter how good the schools, no matter how well-trained the teachers, no matter how well-designed the standards and curriculum. When just a few children in a classroom are inadequately nourished, are frequently absent because of routine illness, have not been read to at home, have spent too many hours watching television because it’s their parents’ only affordable child-care option, have experienced too much neighborhood violence, and have few if any adult role models with college degrees, well-trained teachers can give these few children the special attention they need to try to keep them from falling farther behind. But when almost all children in a classroom have these disadvantages, teachers devote more time to discipline and less to instruction, which itself becomes heavily remedial.

When Michael Brown was killed, I put other projects aside to investigate how the St. Louis ghetto migrated to the suburbs and how the metropolitan area’s black population became so segregated and impoverished. I came away with two conclusions.

First, the segregation and poverty of Ferguson are the consequence of explicit, racially conscious policies of the federal, state, and local governments. The notion that this is “de facto” segregation—the result of accident, income differences, private discrimination, or the unintended result of race-neutral policy—is mythical. Rather, this is unconstitutional, de jure segregation.

And second, there is nothing unique about racial history in Ferguson. The causes of African American segregation in the St. Louis metropolitan area are no different from the causes in every other major city in every region of the United States.

How New Deal Agencies Promoted Segregation
In response to a national civilian housing shortage in the 1930s, ’40s, and early ’50s, the New Deal’s Public Works Administration initiated the federal government’s first civilian public housing program. Many formerly integrated low-income neighborhoods were condemned to clear land for segregated public housing. In St. Louis, the first project for black families was placed in what had been an integrated neighborhood on the city’s north side; the first project for white families was placed in what had been an integrated neighborhood on the south side.

Beginning in the 1930s, another New Deal agency, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) addressed the housing crisis by subsidizing construction of single-family homes outside central cities, creating the suburbs that now surround metropolitan areas. The FHA guaranteed construction loans for builders to create suburban subdivisions—with the requirement that no builder receiving such a loan could sell to a black family. The FHA even provided model language that builders could attach to home deeds prohibiting resale to African Americans.

One St. Louis–area builder was more racially tolerant than others; hoping to provide housing for returning World War II veterans, he attempted to build two nearby subdivisions, one for whites and the other for blacks.

Avoidance of our racial history is pervasive. And by failing to give our students the facts, we are ensuring that that avoidance will persist for subsequent generations.
The FHA financed the first (St. Ann) but not the second (De Porres). As a result, the black subdivision was more poorly constructed, without the parks and other amenities that the builder put into the white subdivision. Because potential African American purchasers in De Porres could not get individual FHA or VA mortgage guarantees, few could afford to buy the homes, and the builder ended up renting them out, in some cases permitting the purchasers to buy their homes on an installment plan (and thus to accumulate no equity).

Such FHA practices were largely responsible for creating the mass white suburbanization with which we are now familiar. In St. Louis County, builders got FHA-guaranteed construction loans to create all-white subdivisions, where houses in the early 1950s sold for as little as about $8,000—about $125,000 in today’s terms—a price that was affordable to working-class and lower-middle-class families and accessible to those who were white, yet forbidden to black families of similar means. At its peak, in 1943, the FHA financed 80 percent of all private home construction nationwide, creating a segregated America.

The homes that white families could buy in the St. Louis suburbs in the 1950s with generous FHA and VA financing now sell for about $400,000. The capital gains have enabled these white homebuyers to pass on considerable financial wealth to their children, unlike African Americans, who were denied similar opportunities. Moreover, the cost of these homes is now beyond the reach of working and middle-class families. Simply telling African Americans, as the 1968 Fair Housing Act does, that they can no longer be prohibited from

The segregation and poverty of Ferguson are the consequence of explicit, racially conscious policies of the federal, state, and local governments.
purchasing suburban homes does little good. The damage done by federal segregation policy is permanent and will take radical and explicit remedial action to undo.

In 1949, before the civilian housing shortage had fully eased, President Truman proposed massive new public housing construction for the nation. Hoping to defeat the program because of their opposition to any federal intervention in the private housing market, conservative Republicans introduced a “poison pill” amendment in Congress requiring that henceforth, all public housing must be integrated. These public housing opponents knew that if the amendment were adopted, Southern Democrats who otherwise supported public housing would vote against the final bill, killing it. As a result, liberal Democrats led the efforts to defeat the integration amendment. They succeeded, and the 1949 Housing Act was adopted with the undisguised intention of keeping public housing segregated.

With newly available Housing Act funds, St. Louis authorities planned two adjacent high-rise public housing developments. The Pruitt towers were for black families; the Igoe towers were for whites. But as federally subsidized suburbanization for whites proceeded, there were few applicants for Igoe until the city opened it to African Americans. Soon, all of Pruitt-Igoe became a black ghetto, housing the lowest-income families who had no other options. Maintenance was inadequate, and the project increasingly filled with welfare recipients and drug dealers. Pruitt-Igoe became a national symbol of dysfunctional public housing; tenants were evicted and it was dynamited in the early 1970s.

Other government policies contributed to segregation in St. Louis.

We typically think of real estate agents as private actors, not government agents. Yet in Missouri, the state regulatory body supervising the real estate industry considered it an ethical violation to sell a home in a white neighborhood to a black purchaser; doing so could lead to the loss of a real estate license. The National Association of Realtors’ Code of Ethics applied the same principle nationwide.

In 1959, a black couple purchased a lot and began to build in the St. Louis suburb of Creve Coeur, but when neighbors discovered their race, a citizens’ committee was organized to pressure the couple to sell back their property. When the couple refused, the city condemned the property and took it to use as a public park.
A decade later, a church group proposed to build a multifamily integrated project in an unincorporated area of St. Louis County. White residents quickly incorporated the area as the town of Black Jack and passed a zoning ordinance prohibiting multifamily housing. A federal court later concluded that “at all levels of opposition, race played a significant role, both in the drive to incorporate and the decision to rezone.” But by the time the court battles were concluded, the church group had lost its financing, and the project was never built.

Pushed Out to the Inner Suburbs

Through much of the 20th century, St. Louis zoning rules promoted segregation. If a neighborhood was covered with home deeds that prohibited resale of property to African Americans, it was rewarded with a protective zoning designation that prohibited construction of anything but single-family homes. Districts where African Americans resided, in contrast, were approved for polluting industry, commercial development, saloons, and liquor stores.

In the city of St. Louis, African Americans in the mid-20th century were prohibited from living in most neighborhoods and were instead crowded into limited urban space in high-rise public towers or deteriorating neighborhoods with private housing stock. With demand far exceeding supply, rents in black neighborhoods were higher than those for comparable housing in white neighborhoods. Black families had to subdivide their homes (a practice permitted by zoning rules in black

We cannot narrow the achievement gap to any significant extent in segregated schools. And we cannot desegregate schools unless we desegregate neighborhoods.
neighborhoods, but not in white ones) or take in boarders to make their rent payments. City services in these areas were inadequate. The neighborhoods became slums.

The federal government entered again, with a nationwide “slum clearance” program. In St. Louis and nationwide, black neighborhoods were razed and replaced with monuments (the famed Gateway Arch in St. Louis, for example), universities, middle-class housing, high-end commercial development, freeway interchanges, or sometimes just vacant lots. African Americans began an involuntary exodus, fleeing ahead of the urban bulldozers. In St. Louis, refugees from the Pruitt-Igoe public housing project and slum clearance programs moved west and north of their former communities, first to other urban neighborhoods and then to inner-ring suburbs like Ferguson.

White families in those suburbs, observing the slum conditions that African Americans left behind, concluded that slum living was a characteristic of black families, not the creation of purposeful public policy. So whites fled integrated inner-ring suburbs, leaving places like Ferguson to become the new black ghettos we know today. Nationwide, in the nation’s large metropolitan areas, more African Americans now live in suburbs than in central cities, in large part because of flight from urban renewal.

Why Our Children Need the Facts
As I wrote in my May 2013 EL article, we cannot narrow the achievement gap to any significant extent in segregated schools. And we cannot desegregate schools unless we desegregate neighborhoods. Education policy is civil rights policy.

But we will never develop the support needed to enact aggressive policies of metropolitan housing desegregation if educators and policymakers remain unaware of the role of government-sponsored residential segregation in every region of the United States. And we are not doing the job of explaining these realities to young people so that they will support more integration-friendly policies in the future.

Elementary and secondary school curriculums typically ignore—or worse, misrepresent—this story. For example, in more than 1,200 pages of McDougal Littell’s widely used high school textbook The Americans, a single paragraph is devoted to 20th century discrimination in the North. It devotes one passive-voice sentence to residential segregation, stating that “African Americans found themselves forced into segregated neighborhoods,” with no explanation of how public policy was responsible. Another widely used textbook, Prentice Hall’s United States History, also attributes segregation to mysterious forces: “In the North, too, African Americans faced segregation and discrimination. Even where there were no explicit laws, de facto segregation, or segregation by unwritten custom or tradition, was a fact of life. African Americans in the North were denied housing in many neighborhoods.”

History Alive!, a popular textbook published by the Teachers Curriculum Institute, portrays segregation as mostly a Southern problem (“Even New Deal agencies practiced racial segregation, especially in the South”), failing to make any reference to the New Deal’s embrace of residential segregation in every region of the United States.

Avoidance of our racial history in the United States is pervasive. And by failing to give our students the facts, we are ensuring that this avoidance will persist for subsequent generations. Only by relearning and remembering this history can we understand that desegregating metropolitan areas like St. Louis is not only desirable, but a constitutional obligation and an essential first step toward a truly civil society.


Richard Rothstein (rrothstein@epi.org) is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute and senior fellow of the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy at the University of California (Berkeley) School of Law.

Copyright © 2015 Richard Rothstein