

Too Much

An online weekly on excess and inequality

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IN FOCUS

America's Affluent and the New Bunker Down

Just 40 years ago, most Americans rubbed elbows with neighbors from a fairly wide cross-section of income levels. But today's rich, Census data show, are keeping everyone else at arm's length — and more.

How many neighborhoods have you ever seen with oodles of rich residents — and poor schools? Or, vice versa, how many neighborhoods do you know with lots of poor people and richly appointed schools?

Silly questions. We all know the answers. Kids in affluent neighborhoods don't go to schools with leaky roofs, tattered textbooks, and uncertified teachers. Kids in poor neighborhoods do.

And what goes for schools, of course, goes for every other public service as well — from parks and libraries to road repair and garbage pick-up. You're going to be much better off, as a person of modest means, if some of your neighbors have more substantial means.

Back in 1970, the vast majority of Americans lived in neighborhoods that did mix people of substantial and modest means. No more. In fact, says a new study just released by the Russell Sage Foundation and Brown University, the share of Americans living amid intense income segregation has more than doubled.

America's rich haven't just become richer, show the study data from Stanford University sociologists Sean Reardon and Kendra Bischoff. They've become far more likely to live among their own kind. The same for the poor.

Reardon and Bischoff have gone through Census data from all the U.S. metro areas with populations over 500,000. They define as “affluent” those neighborhoods where most families have incomes that run at least 50 percent over the typical family income of the entire metro area. Poor neighborhoods have most families making less than two-thirds the metro median income.

In 2007, in the nation’s most typical metro areas, neighborhoods that rated as affluent in the Stanford research schema had over half their families making over \$112,500. Poor neighborhoods had over half their families making under \$50,000.

Nearly one out of three families in America’s large metropolitan areas, the Stanford analysts found, spent 2007 in either a severely segregated rich or a severely segregated poor neighborhood.

In 1970, by contrast, only one in seven American families lived in neighborhoods that rated as segregated rich or poor.

In that same year, 65 percent of Americans lived in neighborhoods where over half the resident families rated as middle income. By 2007, that share of Americans living in middle-class neighborhoods had dropped to 44 percent.

The isolation of America’s rich, the authors of this new income segregation study note, is actually getting more intense than the isolation of the poor. And that isolation, they point out, deeply matters.

“The increasing concentration of income and wealth in a small number of neighborhoods,” the two authors note, “results in greater disadvantages for the remaining neighborhoods where low- and middle-income families live.”

New Jersey hosts some of the nation’s most income-segregated areas, and this segregation, *Newark Star-Ledger* commentator Tom Moran observed last week, is taking an ever heavier toll on our political psyche.

Growing income segregation, explains Moran, “means people of different means don’t rub elbows as much, their kids don’t play together as much, the parents don’t chat over the back yard fence.”

In this segregated environment, people know less and less about people not like themselves. They more easily embrace stereotypes. Politicians from neighborhoods where rich people only interact with other rich people will gravitate more glibly to mean-spirited austerity

budget cutbacks.

These pols don't see the threats austerity poses to the well-being of real people with real needs. They see instead the "lazy" poor.

This phenomenon has been swirling around the U.S. political scene ever since modern American inequality first began skyrocketing in the 1980s. In 1991, Robert Reich, soon to become the U.S. secretary of labor, gave the phenomenon a label: the "secession of the successful."

America's top earners, Reich would note, "feel increasingly justified in paying only what is necessary to insure that everyone in their community is sufficiently well educated and has access to the public services they need to succeed."

The nation's "stark political challenge in the decades ahead," Reich added back in 1991, will be trying to reaffirm that we remain "a society whose members have abiding obligations to one another."

We are, the new Stanford data tell us, most definitely losing that challenge.

About Too Much

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