

The dream is getting closer

A report shows that America's cities are steadily becoming more integrated

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"ALL-WHITE neighbourhoods are effectively extinct," according to "The End of the Segregated Century", a recent report by the Manhattan Institute, a New York think-tank. Only 0.5% of America's 70,000 neighbourhoods are now all-white. In fact, American cities are today more integrated than they have been since 1910. And since 1960 the proportion of black Americans living in "ghetto neighbourhoods" (more than 80% black) has dropped from nearly half to about 20%.

Until the Great Migration north, beginning around 1910, most of the black population lived in the rural South. Then they were pushed into ghettos because of restrictive deed covenants and blatant discrimination by landlords. Although the Supreme Court ruled against race-based zoning in 1917 and New York City outlawed housing discrimination in 1958, real change did not begin until the 1960s during the civil rights era when segregation was still near its peak.

Gentrification has also helped: Washington, DC's Navy Yard for instance, 95% black in 2000, is now less than a third black. America is also no longer a biracial country. Latinos and Asians are moving into so-called white and black neighbourhoods. The typical black American now lives in a neighbourhood that is 14% Hispanic, about the same figure as for whites.

Depopulation of ghettos, rather than integration of them, has also contributed to the decline in segregation. Thanks to better access to credit, there has been a movement out of the cities to the suburbs, particularly in sunnier states. "The biggest drop in segregation over the past decade has been in places that had the most subprime lending", notes Jacob Vigdor, the report's co-author.

Places like Chicago's South Side are still almost entirely black, though overall the Windy City is a much more culturally mixed place than it used to be. Still, John Logan, a Brown University sociologist, thinks the Manhattan Institute's assessment is over the top. Segregation is still pervasive, he reckons. There are still barriers to people moving away from black neighbourhoods, even for those making good money.

The Urban Institute, a Washington, DC, think-tank, recently compiled a report card on a range of measures of racial and ethnic equity in the country's 100 biggest metropolitan areas. The ten best cities for black-white equity are mostly in the South and in the West, while the ten worst are in the north-east and in the Midwest. Margery Turner, who compiled the report, hastens to say there are still significant gaps to address. Even in metro areas scoring high marks, the average black American is more likely to live in poorer neighbourhoods, go to weaker schools, less likely to find a job and is less likely to own a home than the average white. However, these gaps are two to three times bigger in the worst metro areas.