

Still Separate, Still Unequal

The following is a brief editorial written for May 2004 issue Sojourners magazine upon the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs Topeka Board of Education*.

On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs Board of Education* that “Where a State has undertaken to provide an opportunity for an education in its public schools, such an opportunity is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” Fifty years later that decision has yet to be implemented. Laws enforcing segregation are now unconstitutional, but the structural violence of our society has left not only our schools but also many other areas of American civic life almost as segregated and in most cases more imperiled than they were fifty years ago.

In 1950, the segregation of inner-city African-American ghettos may have been modestly more severe than today, but those ghettos were vertically integrated, well functioning communities that mirrored the larger society. Poor, working-class, and affluent African Americans all lived in relatively close proximity. Most people worked, education was highly valued, levels of violence were low, the social organization of the neighborhoods was intact, and levels of single parenthood were low. Over the next twenty years, however, structural forces in our society—Urban Renewal, the federal Interstate Highway Program, federally subsidized housing projects, the exodus of manufacturing jobs from the cities, and, paradoxically, integration itself—would devastate those African American neighborhoods, creating wastelands jobs were scarce, social organization had been disrupted, and everyone living there was poor.

The structural violence continues. The racism embedded in our society keeps us largely segregated since whites generally move out of areas as soon as they get “too black,” ie greater than 10 or 15% African American. Enforced segregation by race is no longer legal but segregation by class still is, so jurisdictions are free to create zoning laws that keep the poor out. Affordable housing is not a legal right. And so the poor, whether minority or not, live in neighborhoods with other poor people.

Another structure we rarely call violent is our funding of schools largely through local taxes, depriving poor neighborhoods of the resources with which the affluent to create their children’s educational environments. Poverty becomes further institutionalized.

Some may object to the term structural *violence*, but death and illness caused by poverty are still death and illness. Researchers in 1990 famously discovered that a black man in Harlem had a lower life expectancy than a man in Bangladesh. Infant mortality (the most commonly used measure of population health) among African Americans is 2.5 times that among whites. (Unlike other Western countries, the United States generally collects health and other statistics by race rather than by class, so the closest marker for class that we usually have is race.) Virtually every cause of death—from obesity, to violence, to cancer—is significantly more common among the poor.

Most of us who don't suffer from the violence of our structures don't see them. We live the myth of equal opportunity and don't see our opportunities for the privileges they are. So we blame the poor for their poverty.

It could be different. Government programs could lift most of the poor above poverty levels like they do in other industrialized countries. We could mandate affordable housing in all jurisdictions. We could finance our schools through national taxes and spend more on schools in poor neighborhoods. We could fund the numerous local community development projects that harness the creativity of those living in the ghetto.

But we won't do those things until we recognize the violence of the structures that keep the affluent comfortable. In the *Brown vs Board of Education* decision, the Supreme Court struck down the 1896 *Plessy vs Ferguson* decision that created the doctrine of "separate but equal." Fifty years later, we are not only still segregated but cannot even pretend that the separate are equal.