

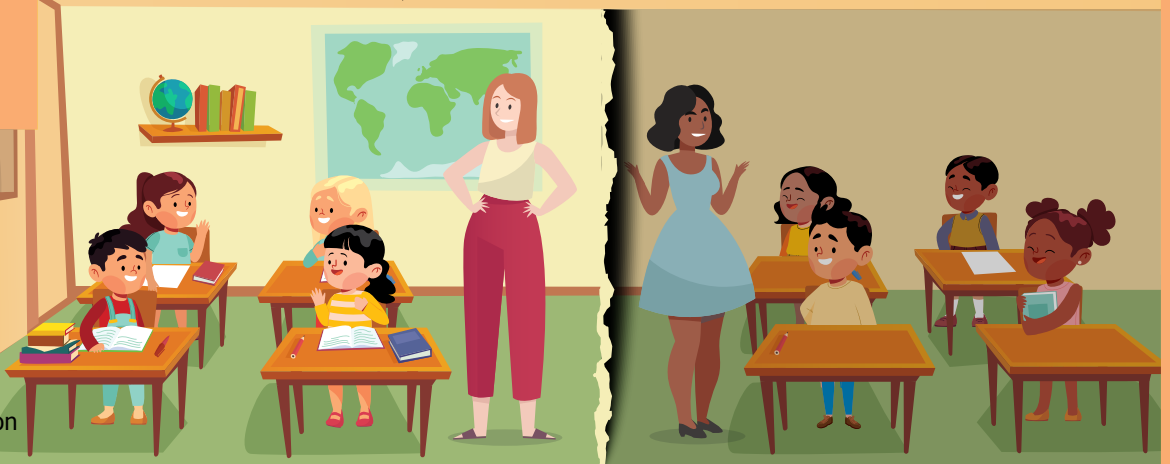
# What's the connection between poverty and race in U.S. schools?

## Authors:

Erin Fahle, Sean Reardon,  
and others

## Associate Editors:

Liesa Ziegler and Rachel Watson



## Abstract

Have your parents ever told you that you should be glad you can go to school – that kids in some other countries are not so lucky? Well, this is true, but it leaves out the fact that even in the U.S. not all children have the same opportunities in the educational system. Black and Hispanic students are

especially likely to go to very poor schools which offer lower quality education than richer schools. These students often achieve less during their school years than their peers in richer schools, without it being their fault.

## Introduction

A *race* is a category of people who share some physical or social characteristics. Similarly, an *ethnicity* is a category of people who share a cultural background and/or language, like Spanish. The way we define different racial and ethnic groups has changed a lot over time and is still different from place to place. In the U.S., the most common racial and ethnic groups are *White*, *Hispanic*, *Black*, *Asian* and *Native American*. One reason to pay attention to race and ethnicity is to help make sure that *minorities* (groups that are smaller) are treated fairly.

**Racial and ethnic segregation** – separating people according to these categories – is a big problem. In fact, it is illegal to treat people differently because of their race or ethnicity. However, many families in the U.S. do live in areas where most people are from one racial or ethnic group. Living in different areas means that students from different racial or ethnic groups often go to different schools, and it turns out

that Black and Hispanic students are more likely to attend poorer schools than their White peers.

Going to a high-poverty school can have many disadvantages:

1. **Lower quality teachers** – Teachers in poorer schools are less likely to have advanced degrees and may not even have a degree in the subject they're teaching, on top of having fewer years of teaching experience than teachers in richer schools. This is because richer schools can afford to pay their teachers more, and teachers with more experience may not consider going to a lower paying school.
2. **Too few teachers** – This means that the current teachers have to work more and students may not get as much one-on-one attention from their teachers. This is also linked to lower achievement for students.

**3. Poorer facilities** – Poorer schools might not have heating, ventilation or air conditioning systems. We know that these factors are also linked to lower student achievement – how well can you learn when you're too hot or too cold?

**4. Resources** – Poorer schools generally have fewer resources and cannot offer their students as much access to technology, additional courses or extracurricular activities.

Because the proper education of children is very important for our future, we wanted to know which students are most at risk of getting a lower quality education. So we examined how racial and ethnic segregation in U.S. public schools is linked to school poverty.



Would you be able to focus on learning if you were freezing in class?  
Photo credit: [The Chilliwack Progress](#).

## Methods

We used data provided by the schools themselves over 18 years (from 1999 to 2016):

**1.** The students' race or ethnicity: Black, White or Hispanic. (We did not include other races or ethnicities because these three groups represent more than 90% of U.S. students.)

**2.** How many students received 'free and reduced-price lunch' (or 'lunch discount', for short), since this is a way to measure how poor the students' families are.

Based on these data, we calculated the percent of poor students in different schools and looked to see if the percent of poor students in Black, White, and Hispanic students' schools were the same.

## Results

We found that the number of students who get a lunch discount increased between 1999 and 2016. It rose from 38% to 52%! **Think about it: this means that in 2016 more than half of all students in U.S. public schools were considered poor.**

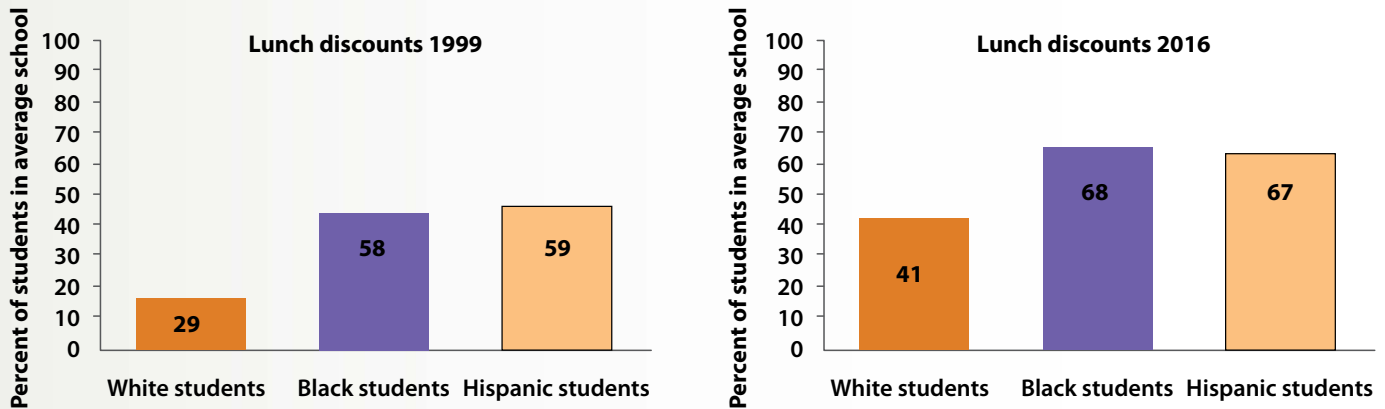
On average, Black and Hispanic students attend schools where around two-thirds of the students are poor. In contrast, the average school of a White student is only 41% poor. So Black and Hispanic students' schools are nearly 30 *percentage points* poorer than White students' schools!

(See Fig. 1)

• **What is even more concerning is that this difference of about 30 percentage points has not changed much since 1999.**

This national average doesn't mean that all Black and Hispanic students attend schools that are much poorer than their White peers, though – it matters where you are in the U.S. There are some places where White, Black and Hispanic students all attend schools that are similarly poor. But there are also places where schools with mostly Black and Hispanic students are over 40 percentage points poorer than those of White peers. **This puts Black and Hispanic students at an educational disadvantage overall.**

**Please see  
Figure 1 on Page 3**



**Figure 1:**  
What is the poverty level in the school where each student goes?  
On average, this depends on the student's race or ethnicity.

Let's take a closer look at the graphs:

1. Which two groups are most similar?
2. What has happened to poverty overall?
3. How many percentage points is the difference between a Black (or Hispanic) student and a White student in 2016? What about in 1999? Has this changed much?
4. Can you summarize the graphs in a single sentence?

## Discussion

First, everyone agrees that all children, no matter their race or ethnicity, should have the same right to a good education. So how do we resolve this problem?

1. Understand – We know that lower student achievement is not linked to race or ethnicity but to racial and ethnic segregation and school poverty. So we need to understand what actually leads to this segregation. Understanding the reasons behind it might help to reduce it or, even better, eliminate it completely.
2. Reduce child poverty – When you are poor, it's much harder to raise a child, so political decisions

should aim at supporting poor parents. This could be done by raising the minimum wage or by ensuring that people from all races and ethnicities have the same job opportunities and receive equal pay for their work.

3. Housing – Often, minority families live in neighborhoods with a lower average income than White families. It could really help if local governments provided affordable housing in many different neighborhoods. That way Black and Hispanic children wouldn't all be grouped together in poor neighborhoods and schools.

## Conclusion

When you are at school, do you talk and play with classmates of all races and ethnicities? They might come from a different cultural background, and this may seem challenging at first. Try to see it as a great

opportunity to make friends and learn! You also have power to make your school a community where every child of every race and ethnicity feels welcome and happy.

## Glossary of Key Terms

**Ethnicity** – a category used for a group of people who have a common national or cultural background. This can be very broad, like Hispanic, or much more specific, like the Nahua people in Mexico and El Salvador.

**Free and reduced-price lunch (lunch discount)** – a federal program for schools where students whose parents earn less money than a specific limit (depending on how many people live in the household) can get breakfast and lunch at school either for free or at a reduced price.

**Hispanic** – a word used in the U.S. to describe the ethnic group of people who are somehow related to the Spanish language outside of Spain and cultures with a history of colonial ties to Spain.

**Minorities** – groups of people that only constitute a small number of all people living in a certain country. Different races or ethnic groups are minorities in different countries. So being a minority is only about where you are. In the U.S., for example, Hispanic people are considered a minority overall, but in most South American countries they are the majority.

**Percentage point** – unit for measuring the difference between two percentages. For example, the percent of students eligible for a lunch discount increased from 38% in 1999 to 52% in 2016, an increase of 14 percentage points.

**Race** – a category used for a group of people who share specific physical or social characteristics within the group which are not common in other groups.

**Racial and ethnic segregation** – the act of dividing people in our everyday life into separate groups according to their race or ethnicity. Though segregation is illegal, it still happens. It can happen naturally when people choose to surround themselves with people from their own race or ethnicity, but it can also be forced by people in power. For example, this could mean that Black people have trouble going to certain hospitals or schools because of their race or ethnicity.

## Check your understanding

- 1 How did we measure how poor a school was?
- 2 What are some disadvantages of attending a poorer school?
- 3 Despite child poverty rising in general, which kids are most affected by it?
- 4 What can politicians do about the rising child poverty, especially for Black and Hispanic children?
- 5 What can you do about racial and ethnic segregation?

## REFERENCES

Erin Fahle, Sean Reardon, Demetra Kalogrides, Ericka Weathers and Heewon Jang (2020) *Racial Segregation and School Poverty in the United States, 1999–2016*. Race and Social Problems.

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12552-019-09277-w>

The New York Times: Still Separate, Still Unequal: Teaching about School Segregation and Educational Inequality

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/learning/lesson-plans/still-separate-still-unequal-teaching-about-school-segregation-and-educational-inequality.html>

Economic Policy Institute: For Public Schools, Segregation Then, Segregation Since

<https://www.epi.org/publication/unfinished-march-public-school-segregation/>

The National Coalition on School Diversity: The Complementary Benefits of Racial and Socioeconomic Diversity in Schools

<https://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo10.pdf>