

## Why your block is more integrated

### *Don't blame gentrification by wealthy whites*

BY [JACOB VIGDOR](#) / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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GABEL, PEARL/GABEL, PEARL

**Gentrification — like these condos being built across the street from a Vinegar Hill public housing development — isn't the real reason most cities are integrating.**

Change — especially the slow, steady kind — can be a hard thing to notice. When we see the same people and places every single day, we often don't register how they grow and evolve.

But when we stop to reflect — digging out an old photo album to size up the effect of time on a hairline or a house — the differences can be profound.

A slow, steady change has come to urban America — to New York City, its suburbs and places all over the country. It has been going on for nearly 50 years, and it is undoubtedly a good thing for society.

America's neighborhoods are much less segregated than they used to be, and we need to appreciate the story of how it happened.

It's not really about upper-income whites aggressively gentrifying black areas and forcing out long-term residents, as some suggest. It's primarily a story of progress, of black families choosing to leave segregated cities and live in more diverse areas elsewhere.

First, the headline: As [Edward Glaeser](#) and I conclude in a new report from the Manhattan Institute, racial segregation is close to an all-time low. In a city like New York, you have to go back a full century to see anything like today's level of racial integration. And in 1910, there were only about 90,000 black residents in the five boroughs — less than 5% of the population.

Over the next 60 years, nearly 2 million blacks moved to New York, drawn to the city from the rural South in search of jobs and an escape from Jim Crow laws.

As these migrants left the segregated South behind, they found new obstacles in the North. They could not buy some houses because of racial restrictions written into the deeds. Banks would refuse to issue mortgages in “redlined” black neighborhoods.

Most importantly, the racism blacks had hoped to escape could be found all over the North. Blacks moving into traditionally white neighborhoods were exposed to many threats and in many cases real violence.

Segregation reached its peak in the 1960s and early 1970s. By the mid-1970s, [George Clinton](#) & Parliament summed it up with the lyric, “God bless Chocolate City and its vanilla suburbs.”

But while cities simmered with racial tension, important events were setting the stage for an era of integration. The civil rights movement brought us the Fair Housing Act, which criminalized many of the acts of discrimination that had been taken for granted. The federal government withdrew its support for redlining.

Government also relaxed restrictions on immigration, which allowed waves of newcomers — most of them neither black nor white — to replenish many declining cities.

Public housing authorities started to get out of the business of constructing monolithic, segregated projects.

In New York, as elsewhere, it's tempting to point to white gentrification as the cause of integration, but that's been a small part of this hopeful story.

Movement out of the ghetto has been far more important than movement inward.

Today, it is close to impossible to find a pure “vanilla suburb.” In 1960, one in every five neighborhoods in large metro areas had no black residents. In 2010, that statistic applied to only one in 200 neighborhoods throughout the entire country.

Some of the no-longer-vanilla suburbs ring Northern cities; over the past 30 years, the black population of Nassau and Suffolk counties has increased by nearly 100,000. The real action, though, is in the Sun Belt. The Atlanta metro area was home to a half-million African-Americans in 1980. Today, 1.7 million blacks call the Atlanta region home — and on average, they live in neighborhoods that are one-third white.

Poverty might keep some families out of some neighborhoods these days, but race does not. That is a real accomplishment.

*Vigdor is professor of public policy and economics at Duke University.*

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