



How I met your mother: The effect of school desegregation on birth outcomes

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the effects of court-ordered school desegregation on biracial births, a measure of racial integration. Using birth certificate data, I present a multiple difference-in-differences approach that exploits variation in the timing of school desegregation in different counties. Among black mothers in non-Southern counties, I find that school desegregation increases biracial births. The results are robust to county fixed effects, cohort fixed effects, and county-specific cohort trends. This paper contributes to the literature on the determinants of interracial relationships and the importance of school desegregation on demographic outcomes.

1. Introduction

There is a long history of economic and social inequality between blacks and whites in the United States that persists to the present day. Many scholars argue that a leading cause of racial inequality is segregation (Almond, Chay, & Greenstone, 2006; Borjas, Grogger, & Hanson, 2010; Case & Katz, 1991; Cutler & Glaeser, 1997; Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2009; Kain, 1968; Massey & Denton, 1988). One type of segregation that has had far-reaching effects is the segregation of schools. Prior to 1954, public schools were explicitly and completely segregated by race in Southern states. Outside the South, schools were also largely racially segregated because of migration, housing patterns, and preferences by policymakers and school leadership. The Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*¹ declared segregated schools to be "inherently unequal." Over the next 30 years, school districts desegregated under court orders.

While segregation as measured by school enrollments decreased in the 1970s and 1980s (Guryan, 2004; Reber, 2005; Welch & Light, 1987), it is an open question whether school desegregation actually increased interracial contact—which is an important factor in reducing discrimination (Allport, 1954) and a mechanism for improving academic and labor market outcomes among blacks via social connections². Social interactions are notoriously difficult to assess empirically; what is more, there were enormous shifts in social norms between the 1960s and the 1980s occurring alongside school desegregation, brought about by civil rights movements and major Supreme Court decisions

(Clotfelter, 2011; Gordon & Reber, 2016; Reber, 2005). For this reason, researchers have argued that it is hard to differentiate the effects of school desegregation from underlying trends in racial integration (Gordon & Reber, 2016).

This paper examines the causal effects of school desegregation on racial integration by examining one concrete and under-studied metric of racial integration: biracial births. Children are the most important "products" of the family (Browning, Chiappori, & Weiss, 2014), and biracial births reveal important behavior patterns between racial groups. To analyze the link between school desegregation and biracial births, I use individual-level birth certificate information from 1970 to 2000 and exploit variation across both counties and cohorts in the timing of desegregation.³ Controlling for county fixed effects and cohort fixed effects, I find that exposure to school desegregation increased biracial births in non-Southern counties among black mothers, and that each extra year of exposure increased the prevalence of biracial births.

My conclusions differ from those of Gordon and Reber (2016), who authored a similar study on the relationship between school desegregation and mixed-race childbearing. Gordon and Reber's (2016) finding that desegregation estimates are sensitive does not hold when I confine the analysis to black mothers and add more years of pre- or post-desegregation data. Gordon and Reber (2016) found a positive relationship between school desegregation and biracial births for white mothers, but the authors show that this result disappears with the inclusion of county-specific cohort trends. This pattern of results may be due to endogenous migration patterns among white mothers. Previous

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¹ U.S. 483 (1954).

² See Sacerdote et al. (2011) and Ioannides and Loury (2004) for reviews. See Clotfelter (2011) for an in-depth discussion of why it is important to study the effects of school desegregation on interracial contact.

³ County is defined as the place where the mother resided when she gave birth. Cohort is defined as the year of mother's own birth.

studies have found that school desegregation led some white families to leave the public school districts that their children originally attended (Clotfelter, 2011; Reber, 2005; Rossell & Armor, 1996; Welch & Light, 1987). In the current study, I also find that some whites responded to school desegregation by moving within state, which would tend to bias the estimates for this group. In contrast, consistent with Guryan (2004), I find that desegregation had no effect on mobility for blacks. Thus, to reduce concern of potential endogenous migration, this paper focuses on black mothers. I also use more cohorts than do Gordon and Reber, which provides more years of pre- or post-desegregation data and helps to separate cohort trends from the actual effects of school desegregation. Also, in contrast with Gordon and Reber, I focus on what I call “non-movers”—women who were born and gave birth in the same state. For women who were born and gave birth in different states, the effect of desegregation on biracial births is likely to be zero because most of these women probably did not go to school in the county in which they gave birth. Including these women in the sample, as Gordon and Reber do, is likely to bias the coefficients toward zero. In addition, I find that effects vary substantially by region, plausibly due to differences in initial racial attitudes: School desegregation led to greater increases in biracial births in areas with higher biracial birth levels in 1970 and lower segregation levels at the onset of school desegregation. These findings help to explain why researchers may find a link between desegregation and biracial birth rates in some contexts and not others.

More broadly, this paper adds to an understanding of the effects of school desegregation (Bergman, 2015; Bifulco, Lopoo, & Oh, 2015; Billings, Deming, & Rockoff, 2014; Guryan, 2004; Johnson, 2011; Liu, Linkletter, Loucks, Glymour, & Buka, 2012; Reber, 2005; 2010; Rivkin, 2000; Shen, 2016; Weiner, Lutz, & Ludwig, 2009). It suggests that education policies can affect racial composition and demography, which may lead to an intergenerational impact on social and economic opportunities.

It also contributes to the literature on the measurement and determinants of racial integration. Commonly used measures of racial integration, such as school, residential, or occupational segregation indices (Clotfelter, 2011; Fryer & Echenique, 2007; Massey & Denton, 1988; Tomaskovic-Devey et al., 2006) provide insights on social environments and opportunities for interracial interaction. However, they cannot gauge the extent of interpersonal contact (Berry, 2006). Previous research has measured racial integration by examining interracial marriage, but these studies are generally limited to descriptive evidence (Fryer, 2007; Kalmijn, 1993). In addition, examining interracial marriage overlooks intimate interracial relationships that occur outside of marriage. As calculated using birth certificate data from 1970 to 2000, 64% of births by black women occur outside of marriage. This reflects a new trend in individual behavior and household formation. In addition, while having children together may be a type of extreme measure of interracial relationships and certainly is not the only cross-racial social interaction of interest, it is correlated with behaviors such as the incidence of friendship, sexual activity, romantic relationships, cohabitation, and marriage. Further, the identity of biracial children, representing the union of black and white parents, changes the country's demography and contributes to its racial and ethnic diversity. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 1 presents the context for the study and discusses the mechanisms by which school desegregation could lead to an increase in biracial births. Section 2 describes the study's data and methods. Sections 3 through 5 present the study's results and robustness tests. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Background

2.1. The timing of school desegregation

In 1954, the Supreme Court declared that school districts should desegregate with all deliberate speed (Brown II; 349 U.S. 294, 1955). However, the exact practices and the timing of desegregation were not

specified. Those were left for the lower courts to decide on a case-by-case basis. Because I control for county fixed effects in the current study, it is not necessary that the timing of school desegregation be unrelated to county characteristics. It is useful, however, to understand the determinants of this timing.

The timeline of school desegregation and its determinants has been widely documented (Cascio, Gordon, Lewis, & Reber, 2008; 2010; Guryan, 2004; Johnson, 2011; Reber, 2005; Welch & Light, 1987). According to Cascio et al. (2008) and Cascio, Gordon, Lewis, and Reber (2010), school districts did not start to desegregate immediately after the Brown case. In 1950s and early 1960s, few school districts voluntarily desegregated. In mid-1960s, Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act prohibited federal money from being distributed to segregated schools and allowed the Justice Department to join suits against school districts that were in violation of a desegregation order. This carrot-and-stick approach led to more sincere desegregation efforts in Southern counties. Later, the 1973 *Keyes v. Denver School District* decision (413 U.S. 189) ruled that court-ordered litigation applied to areas which had not practiced de jure segregation. Thus, school districts in the North that were segregated because of housing patterns were also required to start to desegregate immediately.

In addition to being influenced by legislation and major court decisions, desegregation timing was influenced by when local groups filed for school district desegregation in court. Local and national civil rights groups had to bring cases by school district to local courts. Guryan (2004) provides an extensive discussion of why local groups chose to prioritize cases for particular districts, suggesting that they did not target areas where early desegregation could bring the greatest benefits. Instead, these groups adopted the strategy of first filing for cases with a larger probability of success, so they could have positive spillover effects on later cases. Thus, social conditions may not be correlated with the timing of desegregation. There were also considerable differences in how and when federal courts handled the cases. School districts had considerable freedom in designing plans to meet their own specific needs. Depending on when the plans were approved by the court and on districts' existing resources (e.g., existing buildings and classrooms), school districts would implement the plans in the following academic year or a few years later. Thus, depending on the filing time, court processing time, and school implementation time, there was considerable variation in the timing of school desegregation.

2.2. How school desegregation changed the school experience for blacks

School desegregation affected the resources and peers for black students. First, some research has found that school desegregation is associated with an increase in school funding for black students (Johnson, 2011; Reber, 2010). It moved black students to better schools that were previously attended only by white students (Guryan, 2004; Reber, 2005; 2010; Rossell & Armor, 1996; Welch & Light, 1987; Wells, 2009). In addition, implementation of desegregation plans decreased the degree of segregation in public schools as calculated by the share of minority and non-minority students in a school district (Guryan, 2004; Reber, 2005; 2010; Rossell & Armor, 1996; Welch & Light, 1987; Wells, 2009). An increase in exposure to white students may benefit black students in several ways. First, white students are typically assumed to provide positive peer effects because whites tend to have higher socioeconomic status and better performance in school. This can improve black students' outcomes through direct peer effects, teacher expectations, and parental involvement (Coleman et al., 1966). In addition, white students with higher socioeconomic status attract more public funding and higher quality teachers and principals (Ready & Stilander, 2011; Rumberger & Willms, 1992). Several studies have found that school desegregation improved education outcomes for black students (Bergman, 2015; Guryan, 2004; Johnson, 2011; Reber, 2005; 2010).

However, the extent to which desegregation plans decreased

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