# How 'good White people' derail racial progress

By John Blake, CNN / August 2, 2020

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It was a scene that seemed like it came from another era.

Angry White parents gripping picket signs. People making death threats and a piece of


hate mail reading "Blacks destroy school systems." Community panic about school desegregation orders.

But this wasn't archival footage of White Southerners from the 1960s. This took place last year in Howard County, Maryland, a suburban community that prides itself on racial integration. It was there that progressive White parents mobilized with other groups to try to stop a school integration plan that would bus poor students, who were mostly Black and brown, to more affluent, whiter schools.

Willie Flowers, the father of two eighth-grade boys in Howard County schools, was stunned by the ferocity of the resistance. He says it was a flashback to the type of racism he encountered attending schools with Whites in the South.

"I'm from Alabama and I thought I was escaping that type of nonsense," says Flowers, who is president of the NAACP Maryland State Conference. "There have been cases of Confederate flags at high school football games, racial epitaphs."

In 2020, White support for the Black Lives Matter movement is at an all-time high. People are buying so many books on antiracism that booksellers are having trouble keeping them in stock. A commentator said the George Floyd protests that erupted this spring may lead to "audacious steps to address systemic racial inequality — bold, sweeping reparative action."


Protesters occupy Union Square in New York City on June 06, 2020.

Yet any attack against entrenched racism will run into one of the most formidable barriers for true change: Good White people.

The media loves to focus on the easy villains who get busted on cell phone videos acting like racists. But some scholars and activists say good White people -- the progressive folks in Blue states, the kind who would have voted for Obama a third time if they could -- are some of the most tenacious supporters of systemic racism.
Many are such dangerous opponents of racial progress because their targets can't see their racism coming -- and often, neither can they. Scholars say these people are often motived by unconscious racism they are loathe to admit and disguise their racial hostility with innocuous-sounding terms like "neighborhood schools" and "property values."

There can't be real change until White people are willing to give up some power and resources where they live, says Matthew Delmont, author of "Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation."
"The sign that change is real as opposed to symbolic is that people are making real changes to things close to them in their own backyards, such as supporting more affordable housing in their neighborhood, or programs that would integrate schools," says Delmont, a history professor at Dartmouth College.

But many Whites, he says, have never been willing to take that step.

"Broadly speaking, White Americans and other people with socio-economic status have to be willing to give up something to have a more just and equitable society."

## Why integrated schools evoke so much resistance

When it comes to this issue, history doesn't inspire much confidence. That's why much hasn't changed for what one scholar calls "ground zero" for racial equality: schools and homes.

Black Lives Matter signs are showing up on more White people's lawns today. But statistics suggest that these lives don't matter as much if more Black people start sending their children to school with White kids.

Public schools in America remain highly segregated, not just in South but in many blue states and progressive communities.

A principal talks to 8th-graders about school safety in Wellsville, New York. Many public schools in the US remain largely segregated.

The Economic Policy Institute (EPI), a nonprofit think tank, published a report this year that concludes that 60 years after the Supreme Court declared "separate but equal" schools unconstitutional, American schools "remain heavily segregated by race and ethnicity."


Protests over integrating schools is not new. In 1965 members of a parents' association picketed outside the Board of Education in Brooklyn, New York, against a proposal to integrate public schools.

It said that less than 13% of White students attend a school where a majority of students are Black, while nearly 70% of Black children attend such schools.

It would be shoddy history to attribute all this failure to White Southerners. Resistance to busing in places like Boston in the early 1970s was just as vicious as in the South. But Northern opponents of school integration used terms like "forced busing" to disguise their racial hostility.

"By and large they would say they weren't racists, and they're not like the racists in the South, and that they were in fact liberal and voted for Democrats," Delmont says. "But when it came to their own backyard, they had a different perspective."

These high levels of school segregation remain despite evidence that integration benefited both Whites and Blacks at the height of school desegregation from 1964 to 1980. High school graduation rates and test scores for Black students improved significantly during that era, but integration also reduced racial prejudice among Whites.

It would be unfair to say that all progressive White parents who recoil at changing the racial makeup of their children's public schools are hypocrites. Some of their behavior is also motivated by something called "opportunity hoarding," Delmont says.

"Once White parents have access to a school district that they feel is working well for their kids, they try to do everything they can to create barriers around it to keep the resources for themselves and their very small number of peers," he says.

Not all of the resistance can be attributed to race. Some Howard County parents said they opposed the school redistricting plan because it would harm less affluent students, who were primarily Black and brown, by forcing them to take longer commutes and lose long-time friends. At public meetings many said they were Democrats and worked for nonprofit social justice groups, according to a New York Times story on the school redistricting fight.


Demonstrators carry signs against forced school busing outside a convention of Democratic leaders in Louisville, Kentucky, on November 23, 1975.

Their efforts failed, though. Howard County adopted the plan in November of last year. The plan is based on socio-economic integration (the Supreme Court no longer allows integration plans based on race), but it will change the racial makeup of some schools because many of the poor students who will be sent to more affluent, whiter schools are Black or brown.

Flowers says he is still angry over the racial tensions the episode exposed. He also was shocked by the resistance because Howard County includes Columbia, one of the

nation's first planned integrated communities. He also says some of the opponents of the school plan were Black.

"The surprise was the negative response, the vitriol, the resistance from not just White families but also other ethnic groups," he says. "They all came out strongly against the idea of having their families in schools with African American children."

## Why American cities remain largely segregated

There's also a long tradition of White resistance to racially integrated housing. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once said some of the most hate-filled people he encountered were White residents in Chicago who resisted an open housing campaign he led in 1966. During one march, King was hit on the head with a rock. It's one of the few times he showed fear on camera.

That kind of resistance has evaporated today. Many White people are much more accepting of people of color in their neighborhoods. But if too many racial minorities move in, many Whites start renting moving vans. This phenomenon is so common that sociologists have a name for it: a racial "tipping point."

President Trump evoked that history recently when he cited his rollback of a housing law meant to combat residential segregation.

In a message posted on Twitter, Trump told "all of the people living their Suburban Lifestyle Dream that you will no longer be bothered or financially hurt by having low income housing built in your neighborhood."

Sisters Corlia, Kayla, Aaliyah and Kaylen Smith stand on their front porch at the B.W. Cooper housing project in New Orleans.

The US suburbs are becoming more diverse -- Democratic inroads with suburban voters show that.

"But Black-White segregation remains strikingly high," says Richard D. Kahlenberg, an authority on housing segregation, in a recent article co-written with Kimberly Quick, a scholar and contributor to the Century Foundation, a progressive think tank.

Both cited two "astonishing facts" about housing segregation:

"Middle-class Blacks live in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates than low-income Whites; and African American households headed by an individual with a bachelor's degree have less wealth, on average, than White households headed by an individual who lacks a high school degree."

So how does housing segregation persist decades after such laws as the 1968 Fair Housing Act, which outlawed the renting, buying and financing of homes based on race, religion, national origin or gender?

Two words: zoning laws.

Political leaders can still prevent Black and brown people from moving into Whiter, more affluent communities by using exclusionary zoning laws that prevent the building of low-income housing or apartments, scholars and activists say.

A suburban neighborhood in Elmont, New York. Despite laws against discrimination in housing, many American cities remain racially segregated.

This high degree of residential segregation is not restricted to red states. Some of the most racially segregated housing is in progressive cities like Chicago.

This clash between a White homeowner's politics and the zoning laws that make their racial isolation possible can lead to some odd visuals, says Omar Wasow, an assistant professor of politics at Princeton University. Wasow says housing policy is "ground zero" for racial equality because it shapes access to good schools and jobs, as well as the ability to build wealth.

"There are people in the town of Princeton who will have a Black Lives Matter sign on their front lawn and a sign saying 'We love our Muslim neighbors,' but oppose changing zoning policies that say you have to have an acre and a half per house," he says.

"That means, 'We love our Muslim neighbors, as long as they're millionaires.'"

## What real change looks like

There have been plenty of examples of progressive White Americans who are willing to give up something for racial progress that goes beyond symbolism.
Viola Liuzzo, a White Detroit housewife, gave her life for Black voting rights when she was killed by racists during the Selma campaign in 1965. White people voted for programs like Obamacare that disproportionately taxed the rich to help Black and brown people. Some White families insist on sending their kids to racially diverse public schools and try their best to worship in integrated communities and live in racially mixed neighborhoods.


James Juanillo poses with a chalk message written outside of his home in San Francisco, California on June 14, 2020.

There are also White city, business and civic leaders who are pushing for deep racial change.

Wasow cites officials in places like Minneapolis, Minnesota, who recently voted to "upzone" their city by passing zoning laws that allow the construction of more apartments. He also cites the example of the New Jersey suburb of Mount Laurel, which once had zoning policies that excluded low-income families until a series of court battles forced the township to change its zoning laws to create more affordable housing.

Did this change result in plunging property values and crime-ridden schools? Not according to one highly touted study that was recently cited by the New York Times. One Mount Laurel housing development, designed to attract more low-income people, has now blended in so seamlessly with the community that a decade later most of its neighbors in nearby subdivisions could not even name it, according to the book, "Climbing Mount Laurel."

The benefits of school desegregation are also well-documented, says Delmont, the Dartmouth professor. He says that spreading educational resources around a metro area has been proven to improve that community. He says there's also a selfish reason White parents should not fear racially integrated schools.

"You're not training your children to function as adults in the world as it actually looks today if they don't experience integration before they get into the workforce," he says.

Still, many White people have a talent for avoiding those choices, says Shannon Sullivan, author of "Good White People: The Problem with Middle-class White Anti-Racism."

Some do it by blaming lower-class Whites for ongoing racism. They embrace a lifestyle of "White Middle-Class goodness" -- saying the right things about race and avoiding overt acts of racial hostility -- but use this goodness as a mechanism for deflecting responsibility and protecting their White status.

Principal Sandra Soto of Public School 705 -- an elementary school in Brooklyn -- addresses a gathering of parents in 2016. A pilot program let seven New York City elementary schools tweak their admissions policies to foster diversity by setting aside spots for low-income kids.

Many progressive Whites often aren't aware of this deflection, Sullivan says. They don't set out to intentionally exclude people of color from their public schools or neighborhoods. In her book, she says many of these attempts to protect their status "operate unconsciously but they nonetheless exist and are effective." One of the most popular deflection strategies is calling for racial reconciliation, Sullivan says.

"Reconciliation is about White people not feeling uncomfortable," she says. "They wouldn't characterize it this way, but they just want to not feel uncomfortable and it makes them not feel like they're good if there's some Black people that are angry out there."

As Americans debate now about how to go forward, Sullivan says she prefers that her fellow White people focus on another word.

"I want to hear about justice," she says. I want to hear about things that restore communities that have been destroyed. I don't want to hear about how we make White people feel comfortable again."

Justice, though, often means giving up some power or sharing resources. That's a step many good White Americans have been unwilling to take. When was the last time you

heard anyone talk openly about pursuing integration? Such racial optimism almost sounds quaint, like a relic from another era.

Maybe the George Floyd protests will change that racial pessimism. It's inspiring to see the "Wall of White Mothers" braving rubber bullets and tear gas for racial justice. And yes, it's reassuring to see White people buy books like "How to be an Antiracist."

Anything is better than the racial hostility that was so pervasive before.

But here's an uncomfortable truth many Black and brown people know from their own bitter experience:

Unless more White people are willing to give up something to change the racial makeup of where they live and send their children to school, there will be no true racial awakening in America.

Additional Readings by the Author

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