

From Brown to Busing Desegregation in Southern schools

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In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that schools racially segregated by law were unconstitutional. There was very little desegregation immediately after the *Brown* and *Brown II* (1955) rulings, which left lower federal courts to desegregate the South on a district-by-district basis. By the early 1970s, however, schools in the South were more integrated than schools in any other region.

How did the South make such a dra-

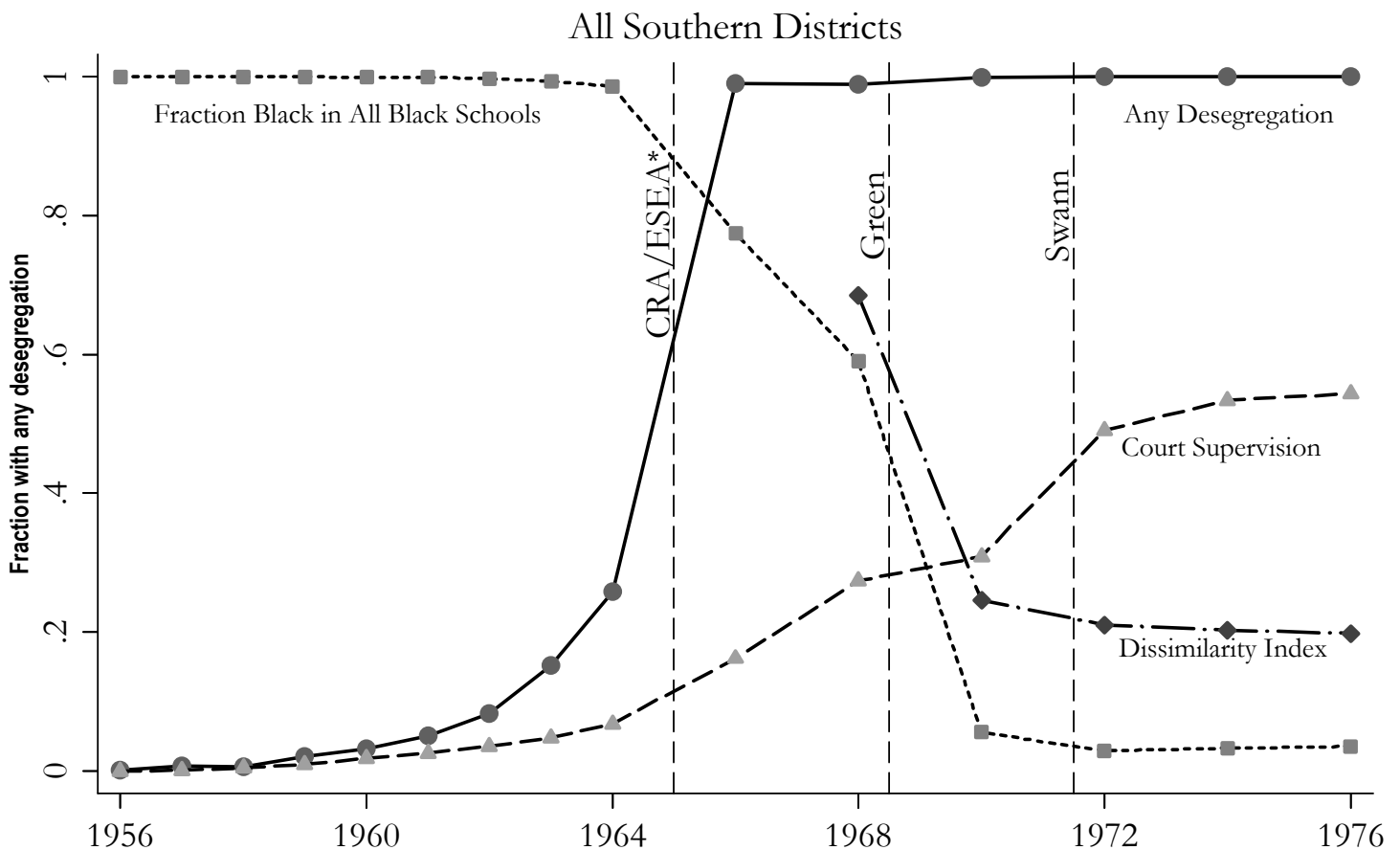
matic transition after years of resistance? In our research we assembled a new data set on district-level trends in desegregation and in court supervision of desegregation efforts in the South in the two decades following *Brown* and investigated how the transition to racial integration varied depending on district characteristics. Viewing school desegregation as a choice—rather than an outcome strictly imposed upon a district by federal courts—it is not surprising that southern districts followed different paths to desegregation. To date, the lack of representative, district-level data has made it

difficult to document the heterogeneity of desegregation experiences.

For the paper, we assembled time series data on the vast majority of school districts in nine southern states. Figure 1 (below) shows trends in several desegregation measures and in the likelihood of court supervision for these districts (unweighted), alongside several legal milestones. In 1956, virtually no blacks attended school with any whites in the average southern district. The share of districts with any desegregation grew slowly through the ear-

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Figure 1. School Desegregation and Court Supervision

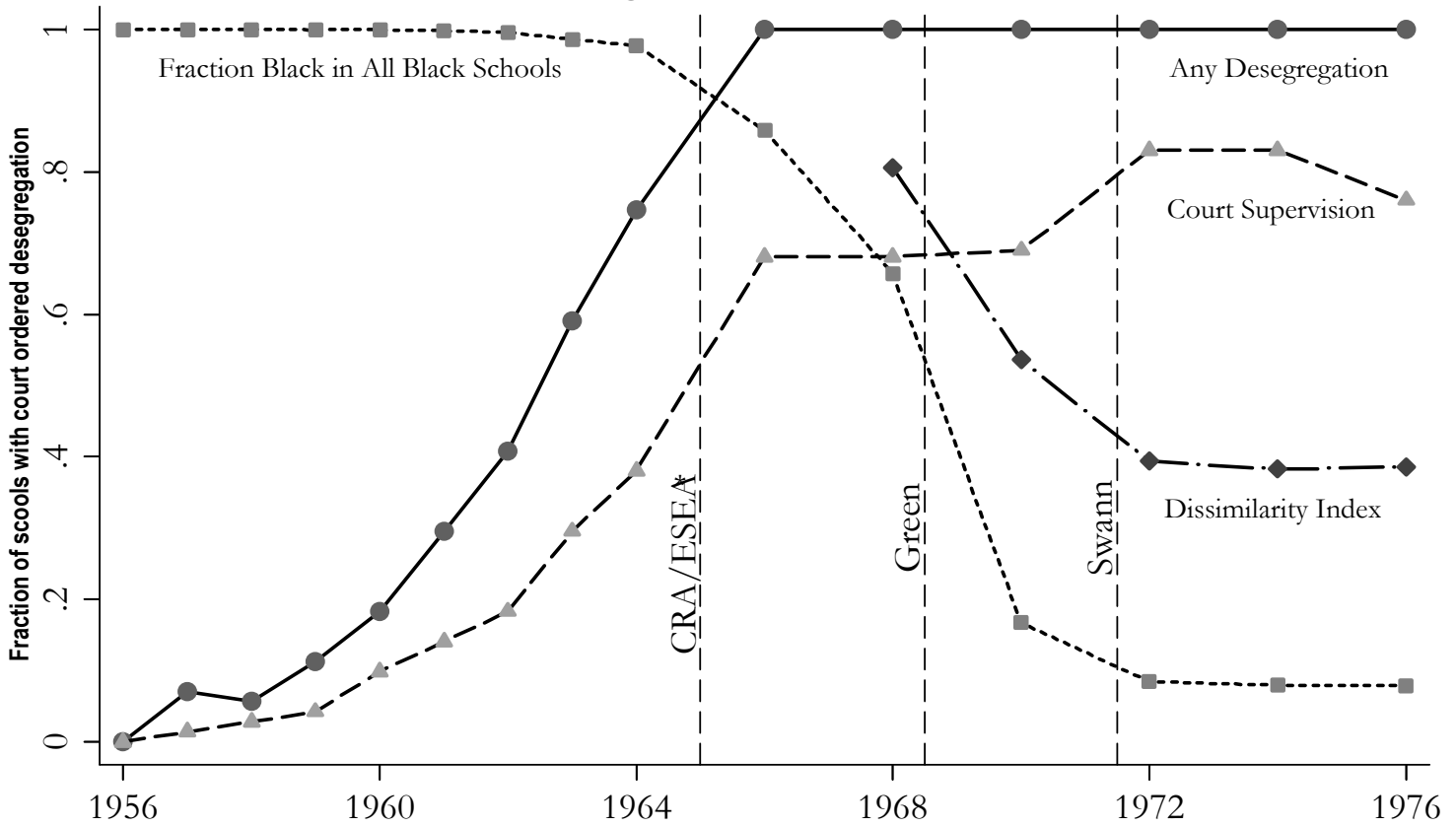


Notes: Authors' calculations based on Southern Education Reporting Service, Department of Health Education and Welfare, and Office of Civil Rights data. See Appendix A for details.

* Civil Rights Act/Elementary and Secondary Education Act

Figure 2. Desegregation and Court Supervision

Large Southern Districts



Notes: Authors’ calculations based on Southern Education Reporting Service, Department of Health Education and Welfare, and Office of Civil Rights data. Sample includes 71 districts averaging enrollment more than 15,000 students in 1960-1963.

* Civil Rights Act/Elementary and Secondary Education Act

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ly 1960s then jumped from 26% in 1964 to 99% in 1966. While desegregation efforts by 1966 were largely token, the all-black school all but disappeared in a matter of four years. The dissimilarity index, or the share of students in a district who would need to change schools so that each school in the district has the same racial composition, shows large reductions in segregation between 1968 and 1970: in 1968, 69% of black students in the average southern district needed to be reassigned to replicate the racial composition of the district in each school; by 1970, that figure had fallen to 25%. Reductions in school segregation through 1976 were small by comparison.

To some, it might be surprising just how much desegregation took place before landmark Supreme Court rulings, such as *Green v. New Kent County* (1968), which required southern districts to be proactive in eliminating the all-black school, and *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg* (1971), which authorized the use of busing to this end. It might also be surprising that such a high fraction of districts desegregated “voluntarily,” or without court supervision. One special aspect of our data set is that it includes small school districts, which have largely been neglected by previous scholars despite being home to a large share of southern African-Americans. Figure 2 (above) makes clear that large Southern

school districts – here defined as districts enrolling more than 15,000 students – desegregated earlier, were more likely to be under court supervision, both early and ever, and were relatively resistant to later integration efforts. Focusing only on such districts overstates the role of direct court supervision in desegregating southern school districts.

Why do large and small southern districts have such different desegregation histories? Size may have mattered directly. Before the Civil Rights Act of 1964, only private citizens had authority to sue southern school districts. Assisting in these lawsuits, the NAACP may

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CHILDREN LEAVING WIC

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costs of participation and decrease the relative value of the benefits.

Conclusion

The results of our regression analysis indicate that more advantaged households are more likely to exit WIC after a child turns one year of age. For many households, a loss of eligibility and reduced need for benefits precipitate their exit from WIC, which indicates that the program is operating as intended for them. However, descriptive statistics indicate that some leavers still exhibit need, suggesting that outreach or

program reform is necessary to increase the duration of these participants' exposure to WIC services. In addition, mothers in participant households who do not breast feed or breast feed for less than 6 months are more likely to exit, and therefore, warrant special attention by WIC agencies since research suggests that WIC provides a number of health benefits to children who participate.

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References

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have sought plaintiffs in districts where a victory would have affected more people. These lawsuits (and the threat thereof) may have been responsible for the relatively high share of large districts desegregated by 1964. Large districts, with many schools, may have also faced more logistical problems in eliminating the all-black school later in the period.

District enrollment may also have been correlated with other determinants of the desegregation decision. Between 1964 and 1966, for example, the vast majority of smaller districts in the South desegregated without court involvement, but this likely had nothing to do with size per se. By requiring non-discrimination to receive federal funds, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (CRA) provided a financial incentive to desegregate, particularly after the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) created a large federal program for education that greatly benefited the poorest districts in the country. Small southern districts were relatively poor and therefore stood to gain more from voluntary desegregation under this program. Further, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) enfranchised blacks where literacy tests, grandfather clauses, and other tactics had long denied them the right to

vote. After VRA, school boards in districts with higher black shares – districts that were relatively small, on average – may have experienced greater changes in the preferences of their constituents, as such districts tended to have lower black voter registration rates ex ante.

These correlations motivate us to use multiple regression analysis to identify the effects of size and other district characteristics on desegregation and court supervision separately, holding constant other district characteristics. For years spanning key legislation and court decisions (1961, 1964, 1966, 1968, 1970, and 1976), we predict desegregation outcomes on the basis of four pre-existing district characteristics – enrollment, black share in enrollment, child poverty, and Thurmond vote share in 1948 (a measure of segregationist preferences at the county level) – and the state in which the district is located.

Our finding that “size matters” persists in the presence of controls. The coefficients on the other characteristics are also quite revealing. Districts with higher child poverty rates were particularly likely to desegregate between 1964 and 1966, suggesting that financial incentives under CRA-ESEA were important to desegregation decisions for at least part of the period. Districts with high black enrollment shares did not initial-

ly lag behind, but were slower to eliminate all-black schools and ultimately had a higher rate of court supervision. This suggests that, though not more opposed to desegregation in principle, whites in high black share districts had a relatively strong distaste for high levels of black exposure. By contrast, states of the “Deep South,” and within state, districts with higher Thurmond vote shares, both desegregated less in the early years and were more likely to come under court order eventually, pointing to the importance of long-standing, segregationist preferences to the pace and nature of desegregation.

These findings suggest that, while the federal government set some important parameters for desegregation decisions, it did not force all southern districts to desegregate at the same time or in the same fashion. Obtaining credible and direct estimates of how programs like CRA-ESEA and VRA affected this choice is a critical next step in filling out the empirical history of school desegregation in the South, and the attendant effects on the economic development of the region in recent decades.

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