Neoliberalism and Residential Isolation: Implications for Social Work

Richard Smith, Social Work, Associate Professor; Mimi Abramovitz, Silberman School of Social Work of Hunter College, Bertha Capen Reynolds Professor of Social Work

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Residential segregation is a threat to social sustainability because it is associated with poor social mobility and health outcomes. We examine how the isolation index, a dimension of residential segregation, has changed over three time periods of the welfare state: 1) its rise (1930s), 2) expansion (post World War II), and 3) contraction (neoliberal era). We apply the Social Structures of Accumulation (SSA) theory, which argues that economic crises trigger changes to the welfare state in order to stimulate economic growth and capital accumulation. We use U.S. Census tract level data nested in counties from 1940 to 2010 made available by Spatial Structures in the Social Sciences (Logan, Lei, Qi, & Sha, 2017). Our sample includes the top 20 cities impacted by the Great Migration (1910-1940) because that is when many Southern Blacks moved north. On average, Black isolation rose during the welfare state’s expansion (1940-1970), but plateaued during the neo-liberal period. Further, where Black isolation fell, Hispanic isolation rose. White isolation fell in each city. Housing policy in the neoliberal period mirrors that of social policy broadly and appear to be key to the new SSA. Implications for further research and policy are discussed.