
School District Secessions: How Boundary Lines Stratify School and Neighborhood Populations in Jefferson County, Alabama, 1968-2014



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School District Secessions: How Boundary Lines Stratify School and Neighborhood Populations in Jefferson County, Alabama, 1968-2014

In a highly publicized decision in spring 2017, a federal judge determined that a proposed district fragmentation by the town of Gardendale, Alabama from the larger, more diverse Jefferson County school district had racially discriminatory motives.¹ Yet, despite this, the district was permitted to form under certain conditions: the Gardendale district would operate two elementary schools under court oversight and monitoring, and according to an agreed upon desegregation plan. In order to operate a middle or high school, Gardendale would have to return to court in several years to report on meeting these conditions of operating a desegregated district. Both sides appealed,² and the formation of Gardendale, which would have been the 13th school district in Jefferson County, Alabama, is currently on hold while the circuit court considers the case. The Eleventh Circuit will hear oral arguments in the case in mid-December. A 1972 Supreme Court decision³ required federal courts to examine the discriminatory impact, not merely intent, of proposed district fragmentation when a community seeking to exit is under a desegregation order. Despite that, since 1970—after Jefferson County’s desegregation case began—six districts have formed. Gardendale, in fact, invoked the formation of some of these districts in their arguments to legally justify their proposed secession and to politically make the argument that the creation of district boundary lines would help maintain the largely white composition of the community.⁴

Since 2000, across the U.S., approximately 47 school districts have successfully seceded from an existing school district, nine of which are in the state of Alabama. Further, since 2000 there have been 37 school districts that have sought to secede, but either were

1. *Stout v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, Case No.: 2:65-cv-00396-MHH (N.D. Ala. Apr. 24, 2017).

2. Jefferson County, Alabama is still under court desegregation order that governs all areas that were under its jurisdiction when the order began in the 1960s including Gardendale. Plaintiffs, including the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, filed briefs in 2016 in opposition to Gardendale’s proposed new district, as did the U.S. Department of Justice, believing that it would impede efforts to further desegregation for students in the county.

3. *Wright et al. v. Council of the City of Emporia et al.*, 407 U.S. 451 (1972).

4. Many of the newer districts are disproportionately white.

defeated or have not yet successfully seceded.⁵ The process for a community to secede from a school district varies depending on state laws but succeeds when a community forms their own, typically smaller school district apart from an existing school district. The requirements vary across the 30 states that allow for school districts to secede. However, only a handful of states require attention to racial and income diversity when considering secession. The state of Alabama makes it relatively easy for small municipalities to secede, with cities of more than 5,000 residents able to secede from a county school district through negotiating an agreement with the county school district.⁶

Beyond the legal uncertainty, Jefferson County is a useful place to examine the increasingly common phenomenon of school district secession as it has witnessed fragmentation occurring before and after the *Brown* decision, despite the fact that Jefferson County remains under court order today. School district fragmentation is the proliferation of autonomous school districts, jurisdictions which then retain the ability to engage in practices such as the assignment of students to schools, which rarely cross district boundaries.⁷ There are important consequences of school district fragmentation, such as tax policies, land-use, and the population diversity of school districts.⁸ Indeed, fragmentation has occurred even as it has created racially distinct districts that arguably complicated Jefferson County's ability to desegregate. The splinter school districts in Jefferson County have distinct population compositions and while some are districts of concentrated privilege with high incomes and home values, others are overwhelmingly nonwhite districts that have public schools with large proportions of students receiving free and reduced price lunch and residents with low levels of educational attainment.⁹ By

5. Since the EdBuild report was published, at least one other community, Gulf Shores, Alabama, has seceded from a larger countywide district. See http://www.al.com/news/mobile/index.ssf/2017/10/gulf_shores_approves_formation.html. EdBuild. (2017). *Fractured: The breakdown of America's school districts*. Jersey City, NJ: Author. Retrieved from <https://edbuild.org/content/fractured/fractured-full-report.pdf>.

6. EdBuild. (2017). *Fractured: The breakdown of America's school districts*. Jersey City, NJ: Author. Retrieved from <https://edbuild.org/content/fractured/fractured-full-report.pdf>

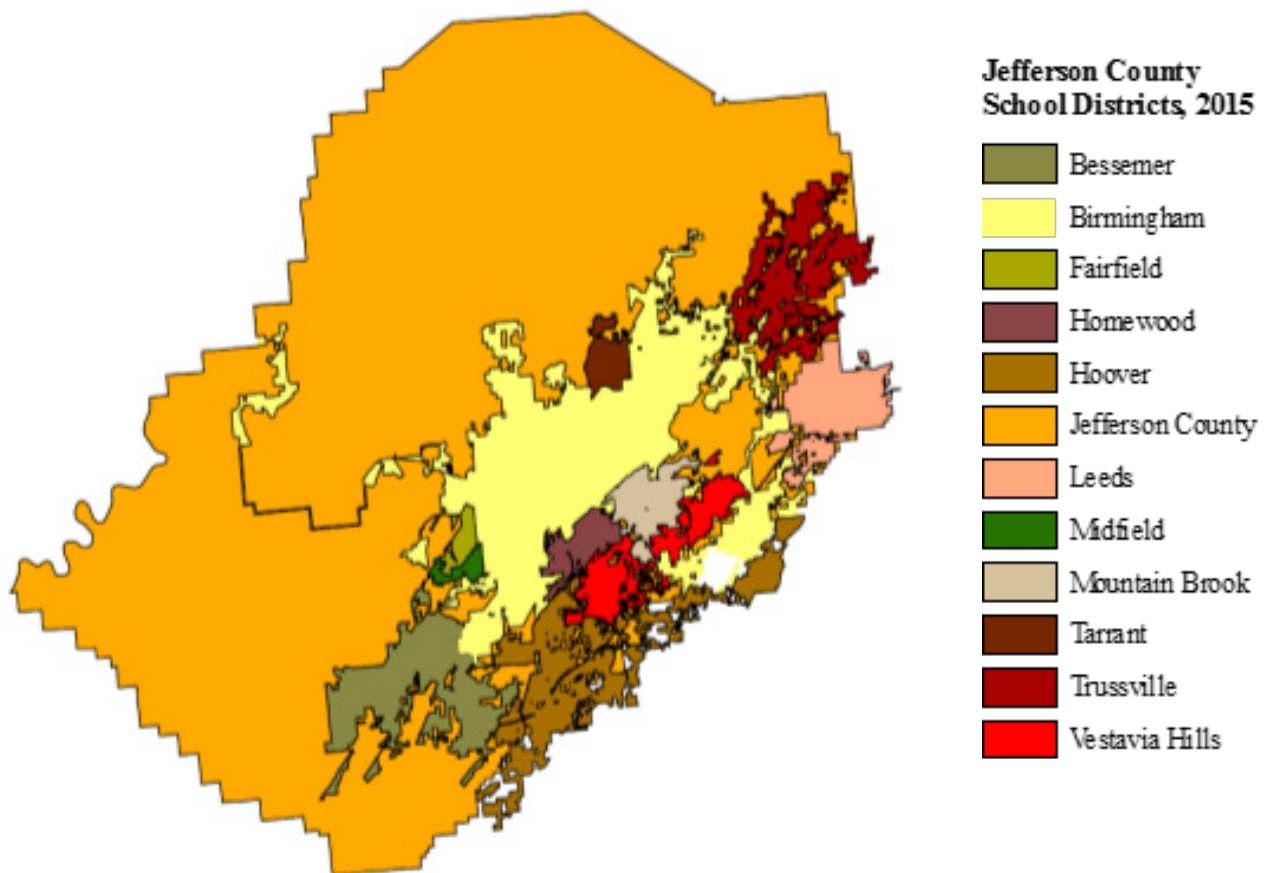
7. Bischoff, K. (2008). School district fragmentation and racial residential segregation: How do boundaries matter? *Urban Affairs Review*, 44(2), 182-217.

8. See e.g., Frankenberg, E., Siegel-Hawley, G., & Diem, S. (2017). Segregation by boundary line: The fragmentation of Memphis area schools. *Educational Researcher*, 46(8), 449-463.

9. This brief updates earlier work: Frankenberg, E. (2009). [Splintering school districts: Understanding the link between segregation and fragmentation](#). *Law and Social Inquiry* 34 (4), 869-909.

2013, Jefferson County had twelve school districts (see Figure 1); Jefferson County school district remains the largest geographically and by population while other districts vary substantially in terms of land size and population.

Figure 1: School Districts in Jefferson County AL, 2015



This research brief updates earlier studies of Jefferson County, Alabama at a time in which the Gardendale secession is under consideration. It provides new evidence about the way in which earlier district fragmentation in the county has separated students into a dozen districts, and also illustrates how boundary lines sort children and households into school districts and communities that are racially and economically homogeneous. With little prospects for cross-district enrollment once new districts are formed, the findings here illustrate how boundaries carry information about the population within them that furthers countywide segregation. The school districts that have separated from Jefferson

County are diminishing the opportunity for students to experience the racial and economic diversity that exists within the county. Because of the benefits of racially and economically diverse schools for the students who attend them as well as for their communities more generally, it is important to carefully consider policy actions that will likely impede racial integration.¹⁰ In Jefferson County, there is an added burden because the district has not yet eliminated vestiges of prior segregation policies. That these impacts go beyond school segregation—which is harmful in itself—to include residential stratification are an important consideration of any secession proposals.¹¹

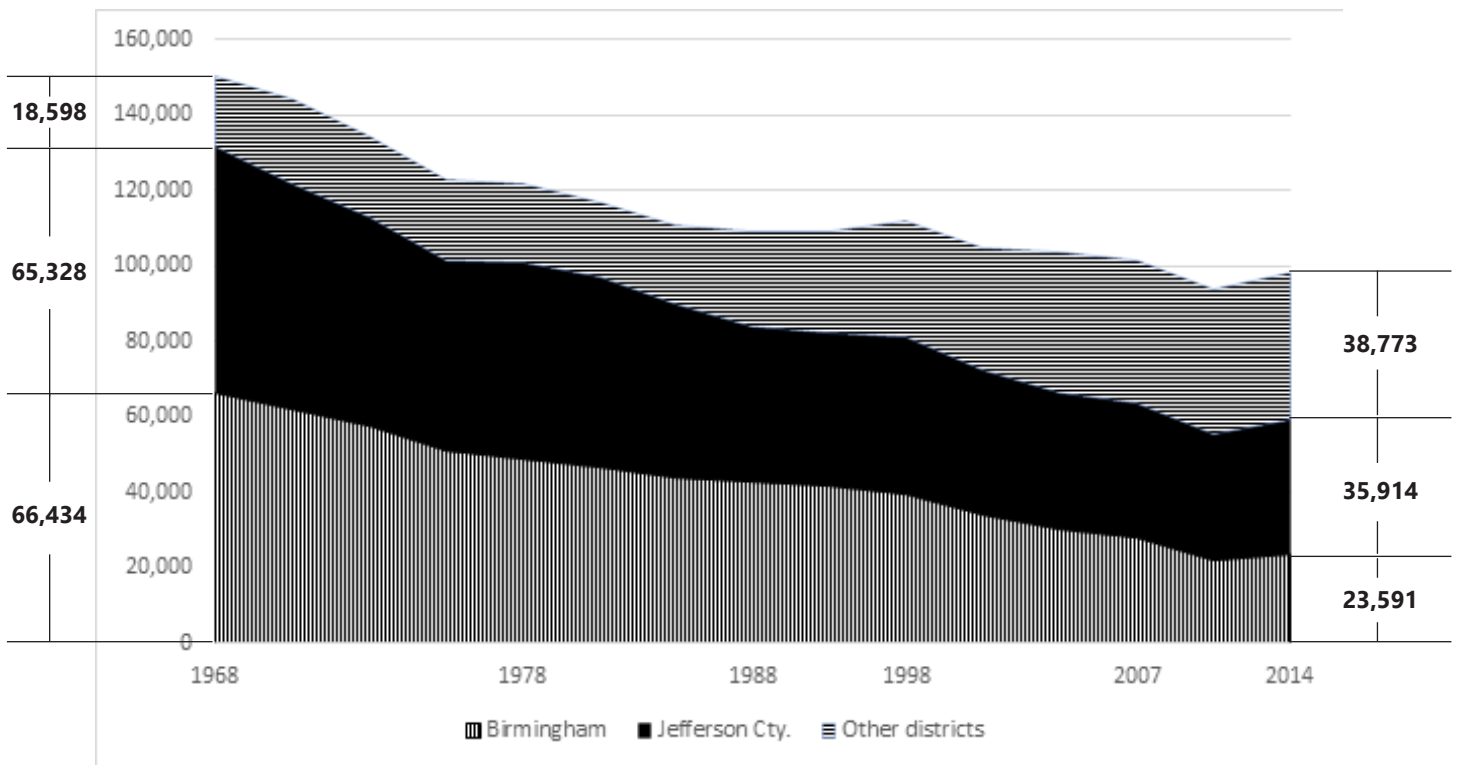
Changing School District Composition in Jefferson County, AL as Fragmentation Occurs

In 1968, Jefferson County and Birmingham school districts enrolled the bulk of public school students; both are much smaller today than they were in the 1960s, albeit for different reasons. In the late 1960s, Birmingham and Jefferson County school districts had over 65,000 students but by 2014, Birmingham’s and Jefferson County’s enrollments was approximately one-third and just over one-half of that, respectively. Jefferson County remains the largest district in the county, but has a lower enrollment especially after the two most recent district fragmentations (Figure 2, also see Appendix Table 1). The Birmingham school district continues to decline—while Jefferson County has had a relatively stable enrollment—with a decrease of over 10,000 students from 2003 to 2014. By 2014, 39% of students were in splinter districts (all those except for Birmingham and Jefferson County).

10. Mickelson, R. A., & Nkomo, M. (2012). Integrated schooling, life course outcomes, and social cohesion in multiethnic democratic societies. *Review of Research in Education, 36*(1), 197–238; Mickelson, R. A. (2015). The cumulative disadvantages of first- and second-generation segregation for middle school achievement. *American Educational Research Journal, 52*(4), 657–692; Linn, R., & Welner, K. (Eds.). (2007). *Race-conscious policies for assigning students to schools: Social science research and the Supreme Court cases*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Education.

11. E.g., Liebowitz, D., & Page, L. (2014). Does school policy affect housing choices? Evidence from the end of desegregation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(4), 671–703.

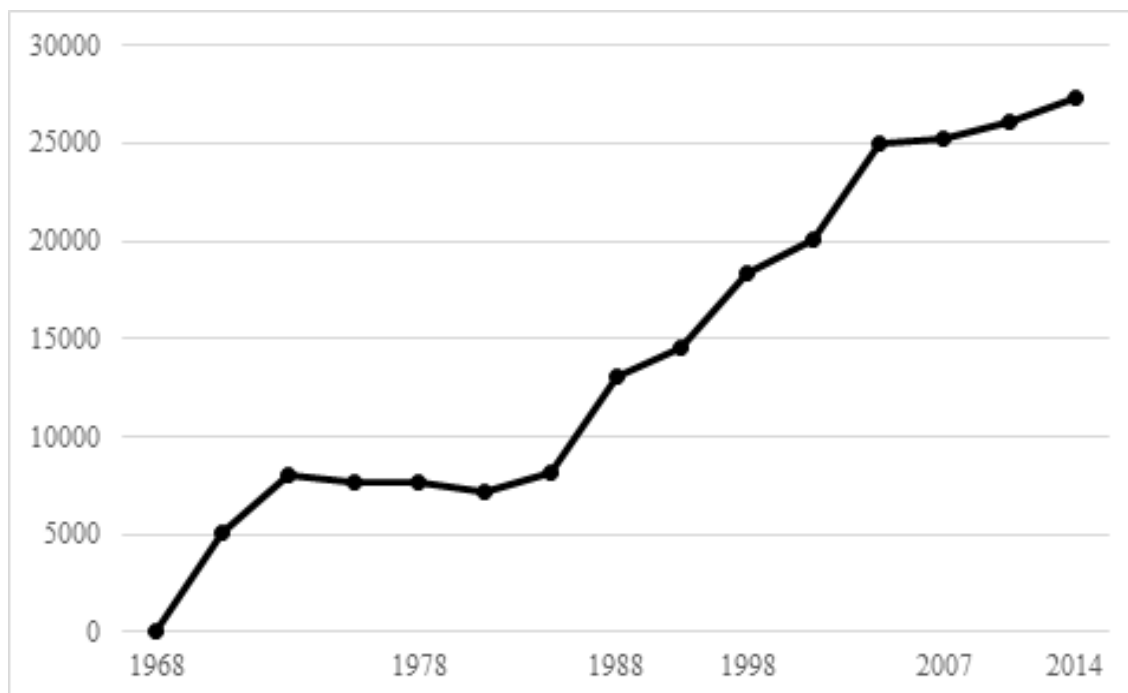
Figure 2: Enrollment in Jefferson County school districts, 1968-2014



Sources: Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data, 1968-1986; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, 1988-2014 (regular schools only).

The older municipal districts that formed before the *Brown* decision and which are majority nonwhite have seen declining enrollments since 2000 (Bessemer, Birmingham, Fairfield, Tarrant). By contrast, one of the newest districts, Leeds, is small but increasing in enrollment. Other southeastern districts are stable or increasing as well. Nearly a third of students in the county’s public schools attend one of the southeastern suburban districts or one of the two most recently formed districts. When examining the enrollment trends for all the school districts that formed after 1965 in Jefferson County, it is clear that beginning in the 1980s there has been large student population growth in the districts that have seceded (Figure 3). This is occurring alongside the general student enrollment decline in Jefferson County and, particularly, student enrollment decline in Jefferson County school district and Birmingham City school district.

Figure 3: Enrollment in school districts formed after 1965



Sources: Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data, 1968-1986; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, 1988-2014 (regular schools only).

At times, districts have transported students from outside of their district lines to schools in order to maintain desegregation according to court orders, which would affect both enrollment and white percentage. One example is Vestavia Hills, which asked to end busing black students from a nearby community due to concerns about overcrowding.¹² With the annexation of several communities, they have increased their enrollment substantially since 1998.

Notably, in comparison to other counties around the South, Jefferson County, Alabama has a dozen districts and just under 100,000 students. Jefferson County in Kentucky—which includes Louisville—has one consolidated district and enrolls a similar share of students yet students experience lower racial segregation than students in Jefferson County, Alabama.¹³

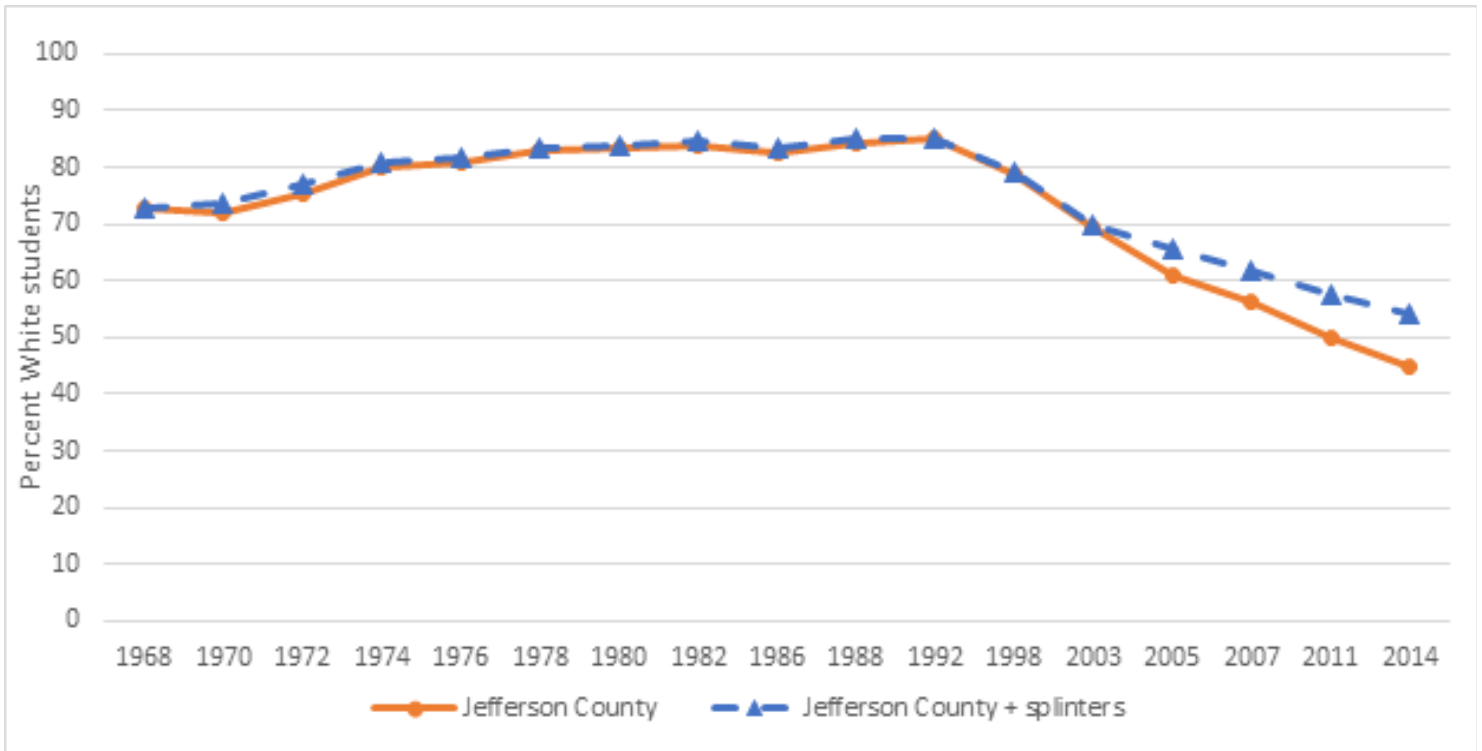
12. Frankenberg, E. (2009). [Splintering school districts: Understanding the link between segregation and fragmentation](#). *Law and Social Inquiry* 34 (4), 869-909.

13. Frankenberg, E. (2017). [Assessing segregation under a new generation of controlled choice policies](#). *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(1), 219-250.

Jefferson County school district most closely reflects the share of white students in the entire county. In 2014, Jefferson County school district's enrollment was still slightly higher in white percentage than the entire county's enrollment. Yet, as districts that have a higher percentage of white students splinter from the county district, Jefferson County school district's white percentage has fallen nearly 25 percentage points in a little over a decade since 2003 (see Figure 4). When considering the percentage of white students in the districts that were part of Jefferson County when the desegregation case began, the share of white students is almost 10 percentage points higher.

There has been a growth in the percentage of Latino and Asian students in the county, and just 40% of students in the county were white in 2014 (Table 1) (see also Appendix Table 2). This diversity has lessened the white percentage in some districts yet some patterns remain consistent over time. The southeastern districts have maintained a white majority, some with extremely high percentages of white students. As has been the case over time, the newly formed districts also have a disproportionately higher percentage of white students. By contrast, four districts in the county have less than three percent white students. One of these, Midfield, has gone through a racial transition where 30 years ago the enrollment was nearly two-thirds white. Tarrant was similarly white 20 years ago, and now also has less than 10% of students who are white. This represents fairly substantial shifts in a relatively short amount of time in what are now the two smallest districts in the county.

Figure 4: Percentage of white students, Jefferson County school district and Jefferson County school district including post-1965 splinter districts, 1968-2014



Sources: Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data, 1968-1986; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, 1998-2014.

Table 1: Percent of White Students in School Districts in Jefferson County, 1968-2014

| | 1968 | 1970 | 1972 | 1974 | 1976 | 1978 | 1980 | 1982 | 1986 | 1988 | 1992 | 1998 | 2003 | 2005 | 2007 | 2011 | 2014 |
|-----------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Bessemer | 37.6 | 33.8 | 30.1 | 30.5 | 30.2 | 30.8 | 29.2 | 29.1 | 23.6 | 21.4 | 12.8 | 6.1 | 2.6 | 2.5 | 3.0 | 2.1 | 2.2 |
| Birmingham | 48.6 | 45.4 | 40.5 | 36.6 | 31.2 | 27.0 | 23.6 | 20.8 | 16.2 | 13.2 | 9.9 | 3.9 | 1.2 | 1.1 | 0.9 | 0.9 | 1.1 |
| Fairfield | 45.0 | 40.5 | 40.7 | 40.9 | 40.3 | 39.2 | 32.9 | 26.3 | 11.8 | 4.5 | 2.0 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.4 | 0.3 | 0.4 | 0.3 |
| Homewood* | N/A | 88.9 | 89.1 | 88.8 | 89.7 | 88.5 | 89.1 | 88.6 | 87.1 | 85.2 | 83.2 | 72.6 | 64.1 | 60.6 | 60.6 | 61.7 | 61.9 |
| Hoover* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 93.7 | 91.2 | 86.4 | 73.8 | 69.8 | 67.2 | 61.0 | 56.9 |
| Jefferson Cty. | 72.6 | 71.9 | 75.5 | 80.2 | 80.9 | 83.1 | 83.4 | 84.0 | 82.6 | 84.4 | 85.2 | 78.9 | 69.3 | 61.0 | 56.3 | 49.9 | 44.9 |
| Leeds* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 62.8 | 64.8 | 60.8 | 61.2 | 60.5 |
| Midfield* | N/A | N/A | 66.4 | 66.4 | 68.0 | 70.0 | 73.3 | 72.0 | 67.2 | 64.2 | 48.1 | 20.9 | 4.3 | 3.6 | 2.0 | 0.9 | 1.0 |
| Mountain Brook | 99.7 | 99.7 | 99.7 | 99.3 | 98.7 | 99.2 | 99.0 | 98.7 | 98.9 | 99.0 | 99.3 | 99.0 | 98.4 | 98.7 | 98.5 | 98.3 | 96.9 |
| Tarrant | 92.0 | 93.4 | 94.3 | 90.9 | 87.5 | 87.8 | 87.0 | 86.1 | 82.8 | 81.2 | 78.1 | 66.5 | 42.0 | 26.0 | 14.8 | 8.7 | 6.5 |
| Trussville* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 87.5 | 86.2 | 86.3 | 84.5 |
| Vestavia Hills* | N/A | 98.9 | 96.7 | 96.6 | 96.1 | 96.3 | 95.8 | 95.3 | 94.6 | 94.0 | 93.1 | 90.6 | 88.7 | 86.9 | 85.9 | 83.9 | 83.0 |
| Pleasant Grove | N/A | 100 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| TOTAL | 60.2 | 60.0 | 59.3 | 59.7 | 58.4 | 58.0 | 56.9 | 56.6 | 52.7 | 52.7 | 51.4 | 48.5 | 44.4 | 43.3 | 42.2 | 41.9 | 39.7 |

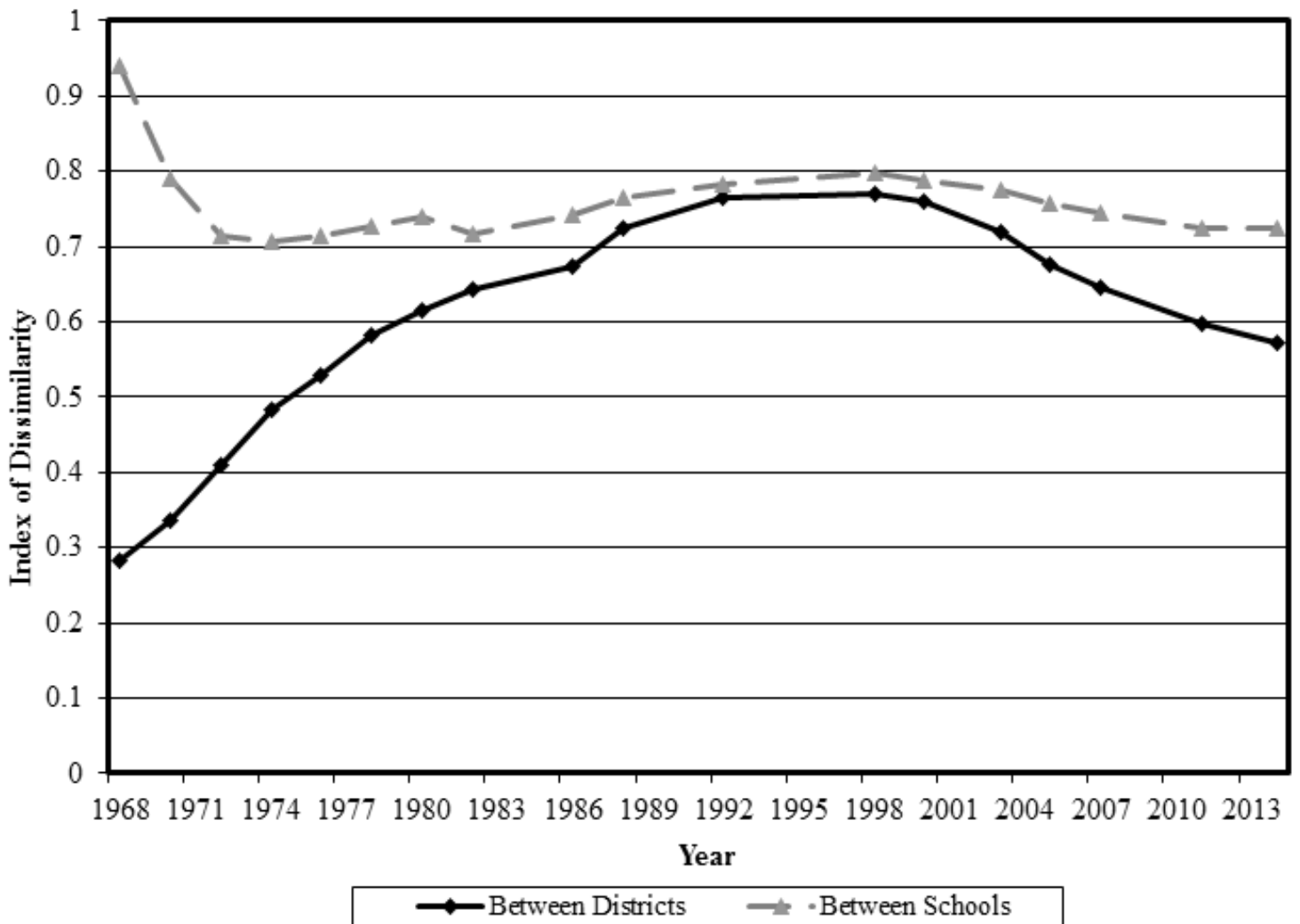
Sources: Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data, 1968-1986; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, 1998-2014.

Note: Tarrant 1968 value is from 1967. Asterisk indicates if district formed after Jefferson County desegregation order in place.

Segregation in Jefferson County has remained very high since the late 1960s. At all points, at least 70% of white students would have to switch schools to be perfectly distributed into schools with black students (Figure 5). During the 1990s, black-white segregation as measured by dissimilarity was almost identical between districts as it was between schools indicating that virtually all of the segregation was due to the segregation between school districts rather than within them. From 1988 through 2003, similarly at least 70% of white students would have to change *districts* to be evenly distributed across them within the county.

In recent years, school-level and district-level dissimilarity has declined between black and white students though school-level declines leveled off by 2014. In particular, there was a larger gap between school-level and district-level segregation, suggesting a somewhat higher share of existing school-level segregation is a result of within-district segregation in 2014 than in previous years. However, black-white segregation by boundary lines still remains quite high—meaning that even if schools within districts were perfectly integrated, black and white students would be very unevenly distributed within the county's schools because of the segregation at the district level.

Figure 5: Black-white dissimilarity between districts and schools in Jefferson County, Alabama, 1968-2014



Sources: Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data, 1968-1986; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, 1998-2014.

In 1972, as districts in Jefferson County were in the early stages of complying with the *Brown* decision, white students in all districts still attended schools, on average, that were majority white (Table 2). In four of seven districts, black students did not have similar exposure to white students, illustrating divergent experiences for black and white students *within* school districts.

By 2014, this picture had shifted substantially for students in every district except Jefferson County. Due to districts with a relatively small number of schools in them and a largely homogenous population in one of the large districts (Birmingham), exposure for white and black students within the same district was very similar (Table 3). White students attend majority black schools, on average, in five out of 12 districts—as do black students in seven of the 12 districts. In five districts, both white and black students are exposed to less than 10% white students, on average. What’s more, white and black students have vastly different racial exposure to their same-race peers in other districts. Overall, racial composition varies substantially for black and white students attending public schools in the county.

Table 2
Exposure of Black and White Students in Jefferson County’s Public Schools by District, Fall 1972

| | Average white student in school with: | | Average black student in school with: | |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| | % Black | % White | % White | % Black |
| Bessemer | 45.9 | 54.0 | 19.8 | 80.2 |
| Birmingham | 20.3 | 79.4 | 13.6 | 86.0 |
| Fairfield | 38.7 | 61.3 | 26.5 | 73.5 |
| Homewood | 9.4 | 89.8 | 82.8 | 16.5 |
| Jefferson Cty. | 14.9 | 85.0 | 45.6 | 54.4 |
| Mountain Brook | 0 | 99.7 | N/A | N/A |
| Tarrant | 5.6 | 94.3 | 93.8 | 6.1 |
| Vestavia Hills | 3.3 | 96.7 | 96.6 | 3.4 |

Source: Directory of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in Selected Districts, Fall 1972, Department of Health, Education and Welfare Office for Civil Rights.

Note: Although Midfield had formed by 1972, there are no data for this district until 1976 and thus is not included in the above table.

Table 3
Exposure of Black and White Students in Jefferson County’s Public Schools by District, 2014-15

| | Average white student in school with: | | | Average black student in school with: | | | N of schools |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|---------------------------------------|---------|---------|--------------|
| | % Black | % White | % Other | % Black | % White | % Other | |
| Bessemer | 84.5 | 3.8 | 11.6 | 91.9 | 2.1 | 6.1 | 7 |
| Birmingham | 88.3 | 4.3 | 7.3 | 93.5 | 1.1 | 5.5 | 41 |
| Fairfield | 97.0 | 0.5 | 2.5 | 97.6 | 0.3 | 2.1 | 4 |
| Homewood | 20.7 | 63.6 | 15.7 | 24.2 | 58.8 | 17.0 | 5 |
| Hoover | 25.5 | 58.2 | 16.4 | 27.1 | 55.5 | 17.4 | 11 |
| Jefferson Cty. | 27.7 | 64.8 | 7.5 | 63.1 | 27.2 | 9.7 | 55 |
| Leeds | 23.4 | 60.9 | 15.7 | 24.5 | 59.6 | 15.9 | 3 |
| Midfield | 97.3 | 1.2 | 1.5 | 96.6 | 1.0 | 2.4 | 3 |
| Mountain Brook | 0.3 | 96.9 | 2.8 | 0.5 | 97.1 | 2.4 | 6 |
| Tarrant | 72.8 | 6.8 | 20.4 | 72.7 | 6.5 | 20.8 | 3 |
| Trussville | 10.5 | 84.5 | 5.0 | 10.6 | 84.5 | 4.9 | 4 |
| Vestavia Hills | 6.8 | 83.0 | 10.1 | 7.4 | 82.6 | 10.0 | 8 |
| TOTAL | 19.8 | 71.1 | 9.1 | 76.8 | 15.3 | 7.9 | 150 |

Source: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey, 2014-15.

Shifting population characteristics as districts secede

The population of Jefferson County has grown since 1960, and has remained more than 650,000 residents since 1980. The population within the Jefferson County school district (*not* the county) since 2000, which is the first year for which we have tabulated Census data by school district, has declined—a time coinciding with several districts splintering from Jefferson County. Birmingham City school district, which separated from Jefferson County school district (Jeff Co SD in tables below) in 1885, has maintained the largest, albeit decreasing, share of the population of the districts that have seceded. In 1960 over half of the county population resided in Birmingham City school district, but by

2013 it was closer to a third of residents.

There has been uneven population growth across the school districts in Jefferson County, with some experiencing declining populations and others experiencing sharp rises (Table 4). School districts in the Southeast (Homewood, Hoover, Mountain Brook, and Vestavia Hills) grew from 1960 to 2013, some quite rapidly. These southeastern school districts separated from Jefferson County school district more recently, seceding between 1959 and 1988. Hoover and Vestavia Hills school districts have grown rapidly since establishing school districts (1988 and 1970, respectively) and have higher white enrollments in the schools as compared to Jefferson County as a whole, as well as higher median incomes and home values. In contrast, splinter districts that lost population were in the North (Tarrant) and the West (Bessemer and Fairfield). These school districts separated from Jefferson County in the late 1800s and early 1900s and have school enrollments that are overwhelmingly nonwhite. The newest districts in the East—Leeds City, which formed in 2003 and Trussville, which separated in 2005—have somewhat smaller populations. Although they are geographically close to one another, they are further from the central city; Trussville is also more affluent and white than Leeds, which is similar to the aggregate county composition.

Table 4
Population, Jefferson County and Its Municipalities, 1960-2000

| | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2013 |
|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Jefferson County | 634,864 | 644,991 | 671,324 | 651,525 | 662,047 | 658,466 | 659,026 |
| Jefferson County SD | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 246,905 | 230,130 | 230,930 |
| Birmingham | 340,887 | 300,919 | 284,413 | 265,852 | 242,535 | 213,180 | 212,211 |
| <u>East</u> | | | | | | | |
| Leeds | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 12,160 | 11,881 |
| Trussville | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 19,178 | 19,697 |
| <u>West</u> | | | | | | | |
| Bessemer | 33,054 | 33,428 | 31,729 | 33,497 | 29,950 | 27,516 | 27,043 |
| Fairfield | 15,816 | 14,369 | 13,040 | 12,200 | 12,380 | 11,135 | 10,987 |
| Midfield | 3,556 | 6,399 | 6,536 | 5,559 | 5,785 | 5,366 | 5,284 |
| <u>Southeast</u> | | | | | | | |
| Homewood | 20,289 | 21,245 | 21,412 | 22,922 | 24,880 | 25,123 | 25,535 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Hoover | N/A | N/A | 19,792 | 39,788 | 62,480 | 81,254 | 83,012 |
| Mountain Brook | 12,680 | 19,474 | 19,718 | 19,810 | 20,985 | 20,398 | 20,518 |
| Vestavia Hills | 4,029 | 8,301 | 15,722 | 19,749 | 24,840 | 33,831 | 34,116 |
| <u>North</u> | | | | | | | |
| Tarrant | 7,810 | 6,835 | 8,148 | 8,046 | 7,140 | 6,412 | 6,278 |

Sources: US Census of Population and Housing 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, SDDS tabulations of Census 2000 and ACS 2011-13 data.

Median home values in Jefferson County vary substantially depending on the school district.¹⁴ Property values are closely tied to schools¹⁵ and when school district fragmentation is high, school district boundaries act as signals for families making residential decisions.¹⁶ In Jefferson County as a whole, the median home value was \$142,300 in 2013, but the school districts within the county had median home values that ranged from \$76,200 to \$545,900 (Table 5). As compared to the county, both Jefferson County school district and Birmingham City school district had lower median home values, and in the case of Birmingham, by quite a lot. In 1960 and 1970 the Birmingham school district had median home values that were very similar to Jefferson County as a whole. Yet, by 1980, a gap between the two had arisen, and Birmingham school district has consistently and increasingly had lower median home values than Jefferson County. School district demographics are often understood as an indicator of school quality,¹⁷ and as Birmingham City school district saw decreasing home values, the district was also experiencing decreasing enrollments of white students in the public schools (Table 1).

Median home values increased in the southeastern districts by a higher rate than for Jefferson County as a whole, and as compared to splinter districts in the West and the North. The southeastern school districts have had the highest median home values and have seen rising home values from the time they were formed until 2013. Public

14. We also examined median incomes and found similar patterns.

15. Dougherty, J., Harrelson, J., Maloney, L., Murphy, D., Smith, R., Snow, M. & Zannoni, D. (2009). School choice in suburbia: Test scores, race, and housing markets. *American Journal of Education* 115: 523–48; Kane, T., Riegg, S., & Steger, D. (2010). School quality, neighborhoods and housing prices: Effects of free choice among public schools. *American Law and Economics Review*, 8(2), 183-212.

16. Weiher, G. (1992). *The fractured metropolis: Political fragmentation and metropolitan segregation*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

17. Holme, J.J. (2002). Buying homes, buying schools. *Harvard Educational Review*, 72, (2), 177–206.

school enrollments in the southeastern school districts have been majority white since they were formed. Home values diverged substantially during the 1970s. In contrast to the high home values seen in the southeastern districts, the western splinter districts have lower median home values and two of the three districts saw declines in median home values from 2010 to 2013. These districts have, over time, lost white enrollments in the public schools and have become predominantly nonwhite. Of the newest school districts, Leeds has median home values similar to Jefferson County as a whole while Trussville has substantially higher home values—and both saw median home values increasing modestly from 2010 to 2013.

Our review¹⁸ of home ads on Zillow.com for two communities in Jefferson County further illustrates the relationship between home values and school districts. In Tarrant City, a school district with one of the lowest median home values and highest proportions of black residents in Jefferson County, out of 64 homes listed for sale on Zillow only two of the listings included a mention of schools (three percent). These listings did not allude to school quality; instead they focused on proximity, stating “convenient to schools” and “within walking distance to Tarrant Intermediate School.” White students comprise 4.7% of Tarrant Intermediate School’s enrollment. In contrast, in Homewood, one of the municipalities with the highest home values and a larger proportion of white residents, out of 157 homes listed for sale on Zillow, 37 mentioned schools (24%). Unlike for Tarrant City, the listings in Homewood specifically noted school quality when schools were mentioned. For example, numerous listings referred to Homewood’s schools as “award winning schools”, and one read, “Homewood has great, sought after schools.” Additionally, specific elementary schools were often cited in the ads, indicating that the home was zoned for a particular elementary school. The Homewood schools that were cited in the Zillow ads, Edgewood Elementary and Shades Cahaba Elementary, are both over 70% white.

18. Zillow ads reviewed on October 22, 2017. See also Pearce, D. (1980). *Breaking down the barriers: New evidence on the impact of metropolitan school desegregation on housing patterns*. Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Education.

Table 5
Median Home Value, Jefferson County and Its Municipalities, 1960-2000 (in dollars)

| | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2013 |
|----------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Jefferson County | 9,500 | 13,500 | 39,600 | 58,700 | 90,700 | 143,300 | 142,300 |
| Jefferson County School District | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 91,600 | 133,300 | 133,100 |
| <u>Birmingham East</u> | | | | | | | |
| Leeds | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 138,500 | 140,100 |
| Trussville | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 229,500 | 232,600 |
| <u>West</u> | | | | | | | |
| Bessemer | 6,900 | 10,200 | 28,600 | 40,500 | 56,400 | 88,400 | 88,100 |
| Fairfield | 9,500 | 13,700 | 35,800 | 50,500 | 70,000 | 94,000 | 94,600 |
| Midfield | 11,500 | 13,000 | 32,800 | 42,000 | 58,100 | 78,000 | 74,900 |
| <u>Southeast</u> | | | | | | | |
| Homewood | 16,300 | 18,800 | 55,700 | 89,100 | 156,700 | 283,400 | 285,200 |
| Hoover | | | 79,100 | 112,700 | 176,400 | 266,300 | 262,500 |
| Mountain Brook | 30,700 | 39,800 | 113,800 | 190,800 | 332,000 | 538,500 | 545,900 |
| Vestavia Hills | 27,600 | 31,300 | 84,000 | 134,500 | 197,700 | 330,200 | 346,400 |
| <u>North</u> | | | | | | | |
| Tarrant | 8,200 | 11,200 | 28,800 | 40,100 | 51,900 | 73,300 | 76,200 |

Sources: US Census of Population and Housing 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, SDDS tabulations of Census 2000 and ACS 2011-13 data.

Gains in educational attainment were made throughout Jefferson County from 1960 to 2013, but these gains were uneven once again across district boundary lines. In Jefferson County by 2010, about 30% of the population over 25 had a bachelor's degree (Table 6). The school districts in the West and North that had been established separate from Jefferson County much earlier had lower levels of educational attainment throughout the years, while school districts that separated since the 1950s in the Southeast saw higher levels of educational attainment. Birmingham City school district had levels of educational attainment that were quite similar to Jefferson County in 1960, but by 2010 there was a large gap in educational attainment between Birmingham and the county. Similarly, Midfield and Fairfield had comparable levels of educational attainment to the county in 1960, but since 1980 have experienced a persistent gap in educational attainment as

compared to the county. In Midfield, white % of enrollment also declined sharply after 1980. Bessemer and Tarrant never had rates of educational attainment that were near to the county, and throughout the years had the lowest rates of all the school districts.

In 1960 the southeastern school districts had the highest educational attainment of the school districts in Jefferson County, a pattern that persists through recent years. The gains made in the percent of the population with a bachelor’s degree each decade in the southeastern districts were larger as compared to changes in Jefferson County as a whole or in other school districts in the county. Particularly large gains were made in the southeastern districts from 1970 to 1990, the decades immediately following their separation from Jefferson County school district.

Table 6
Percentage of Bachelor’s Degree Recipients Among Residents 25 years or Older, Jefferson County and Its Municipalities, 1960-2000

| | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 | 2013 |
|----------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Jefferson County | 7.1 | 9.5 | 15.8 | 19.9 | 24.6 | 29.3 | 30.8 |
| Jefferson County School District | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 12.0 | 20.1 | 21.9 |
| <u>Birmingham East</u> | | | | | | | |
| Leeds | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 22.6 | 23.4 |
| Trussville | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 41.3 | 40.8 |
| <u>West</u> | | | | | | | |
| Bessemer | 3.4 | 4.2 | 7.0 | 7.2 | 9.2 | 12.6 | 12.7 |
| Fairfield | 7.0 | 8.3 | 11.2 | 17.1 | 20.0 | 17.9 | 18.4 |
| Midfield | 6.6 | 4.1 | 6.8 | 5.5 | 8.9 | 21.9 | 16.4 |
| <u>Southeast</u> | | | | | | | |
| Homewood | 22.6 | 25.0 | 35.3 | 42.0 | 54.2 | 59.0 | 59.9 |
| Hoover | | | 37.3 | 45.8 | 52.6 | 55.9 | 55.2 |
| Mountain Brook | 38.9 | 45.0 | 59.3 | 67.4 | 77.3 | 83.0 | 84.7 |
| Vestavia Hills | 29.7 | 34.9 | 41.3 | 53.2 | 60.8 | 68.9 | 66.0 |
| <u>North</u> | | | | | | | |
| Tarrant | 1.7 | 4.0 | 4.1 | 4.4 | 8.3 | 13.1 | 9.8 |

Sources: US Census of Population and Housing 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, SDDS tabulations of Census 2000 and ACS 2011-13 data.

Conclusion

This research brief has illustrated the continuing educational and residential stratification in Jefferson County, Alabama where a dozen districts now serve less than 100,000 public school students. It is useful context to consider as the formation of a 13th district is on hold, especially given that Gardendale would enroll a disproportionately high percentage of white students.

By 2014, the number of students enrolled in splinter school districts was larger than either Jefferson County or Birmingham City's enrollment (just under 40,000). The enrollment of both once-large districts has declined significantly since 1960s, reflecting families moving out of Birmingham and the loss of students to districts that splintered from the county district. Moreover, the loss of students is not evenly distributed by race. Jefferson County has experienced a substantial decline in the white enrollment since the 1990s, as new, largely white districts splintered and/or white families moved to districts that had already splintered. Were all the post-1965 districts to be part of Jefferson County school district in 2014-15, that district would enroll over 60,000 students and be 54% white. Instead, Jefferson County school district has under 40,000 students and is majority nonwhite (55% nonwhite for the last year of data).

As district boundaries proliferate, racial segregation remains high in Jefferson County's schools. Decades ago, this school-level segregation was a result of within-district segregation that had occurred throughout the state as a result of segregation laws. Federal court oversight has helped to reduce within-district segregation, but while under court order, new districts have formed impeding the ability to fully desegregate students as district-level segregation remains high. While one district (Pleasant Grove) was required to be dissolved because of racial discrimination in the early 1970s, other districts were permitted to form after 1965 even as they were, and in many cases remain, disproportionately white. Some districts, however, rapidly transitioned from white to nonwhite without a large base of students and residents as suburbanization continued. This history and current demographics offer a cautionary tale both specifically for Gardendale as well as communities around the country seeking to secede from larger

districts, which have political and educational implications even when the larger districts are not under court oversight as is the case in Jefferson County.

The case of Jefferson County also makes clear that there are important residential dimensions to school district secessions. In areas where the population is heterogeneous, school districts often serve to separate populations along racial and income lines.¹⁹ We see in Jefferson County that the splinter school districts have populations that are disparate from the county as a whole. This is apparent for more recently seceded districts that have higher percentage of white residents, and higher median incomes and educational attainment than the county. It is also apparent in the school districts that seceded over a century ago that are majority black and have very low median incomes and educational attainment. The implications of school district secession go beyond just schools to influencing residential patterns and the housing market, as new school boundaries are created that take on social meanings and impact residential decisions.²⁰

Whether Gardendale should be allowed to secede from Jefferson County, Alabama—after the fragmentation of several districts that, if now part of the district, would conceivably result in a much different enrollment size and racial composition—is now a question for the federal courts. As this brief has illustrated, secession decisions have short and long-term effects on the districts that are left, and arguably more generally in the entire region, by creating a plethora of public schooling options whose boundaries over time gain distinct social meaning. This is a legal question specifically for districts under court oversight for desegregation, but remains a policy question for the many remaining larger districts that are not under desegregation orders. To what extent should district secession be allowed to occur and under what conditions?

State laws certainly play a critical role in the ease with which secession occurs. Communities should consider the potential effects on regional racial and economic integration of schools in addition to other questions such as whether they can afford to

19. Bischoff, K. (2008). School district fragmentation and racial residential segregation: How do boundaries matter? *Urban Affairs Review*, 44(2), 182-217.; Owens, A., Reardon, S.F., & Jencks, C. (2016). Income segregation between schools and school districts. *American Educational Research Journal*, 53(4), 1159-1197.

20. Weiher, G. (1992). *The fractured metropolis: Political fragmentation and metropolitan segregation*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

operate a separate district. Because of the vested interest that communities have in this process, it might be worth identifying a state-level entity to independently assess the potential effect on segregation of forming a new district. The federal government should also have a vested role in ascertaining whether the proposed secession would have a racially discriminatory effect on students. Moreover, since these findings illustrate the ways in which establishing separate school districts relate to growing distinctions among residential populations, such decisions should have non-educational leaders' input as well.

As our nation and our public school enrollment grow more racially diverse, and we continue to learn about the myriad of ways in which exposure to diversity in schools and neighborhoods benefits all, especially young people, it is important to carefully consider the creation of new structures like school district boundary lines that may further separate areas into homogenous subunits. Rethinking the provision of public schooling as a collective good instead of thinking of it as an individual benefit for students and their families is a first step towards critically assessing how this new generation of local control, when overlaying existing stratification, will further inequality.

Appendix

Table 1: Enrollment in Jefferson County Public School Districts, 1968-2014

| | 1968 | 1970 | 1972 | 1976 | 1978 | 1980 | 1986 | 1988 | 1992 | 1998 | 2003 | 2005 | 2007 | 2011 | 2014 |
|-----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|---------------|---------------|
| Bessemer | 8,595 | 7,481 | 6,913 | 6,246 | 6,014 | 5,828 | 5,844 | 5,302 | 5,210 | 4,810 | 4,105 | 4,189 | 4,245 | 4,376 | 3,962 |
| Birmingham | 66,434 | 61,994 | 57,729 | 50,913 | 49,105 | 46,523 | 43,782 | 43,000 | 41,947 | 39,493 | 34,097 | 30,557 | 28,013 | 22,089 | 23,591 |
| Fairfield | 3,616 | 2,957 | 2,579 | 2,089 | 2,021 | 2,005 | 1,975 | 2,132 | 2,243 | 2,235 | 2,353 | 2,354 | 2,327 | 1,853 | 1,876 |
| Homewood* | N/A | 2,476 | 2,963 | 2,651 | 2,519 | 2,356 | 2,602 | 2,769 | 3,079 | 3,292 | 3,261 | 3,357 | 3,363 | 3,634 | 4,007 |
| Hoover* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 4,717 | 5,635 | 9,397 | 9,177 | 9,262 | 9,165 | 8,714 | 9,061 |
| Jefferson Cty. | 65,328 | 59,717 | 55,448 | 50,713 | 51,619 | 50,400 | 46,225 | 41,143 | 40,396 | 41,892 | 38,631 | 35,719 | 35,908 | 33,535 | 35,914 |
| Leeds* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 1,282 | 1,301 | 1,377 | 1,670 | 1,901 |
| Midfield* | N/A | N/A | 2,047 | 1,906 | 1,895 | 1,782 | 1,979 | 1,927 | 1,771 | 1,342 | 1,184 | 1,217 | 1,257 | 1,328 | 1,163 |
| Mountain Brook | 4,497 | 4,497 | 4,348 | 3,872 | 3,813 | 3,540 | 3,219 | 3,170 | 3,424 | 3,856 | 4,149 | 4,327 | 4,328 | 4,490 | 4,461 |
| Tarrant | 1,890 | 1,652 | 1,494 | 1,571 | 1,576 | 1,564 | 1,575 | 1,598 | 1,574 | 1,329 | 1,374 | 1,470 | 1,366 | 1,214 | 1,204 |
| Trussville* | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | 4,174 | 4,118 | 4,189 | 4,292 |
| Vestavia Hills* | N/A | 2,592 | 3,015 | 3,086 | 3,194 | 3,075 | 3,522 | 3,684 | 4,018 | 4,305 | 5,219 | 5,692 | 5,930 | 6,511 | 6,846 |
| Pleasant Grove | N/A | 1,005 | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| TOTAL | 150,360 | 144,371 | 134,489 | 123,047 | 121,707 | 117,073 | 110,722 | 109,442 | 109,298 | 111,951 | 104,832 | 103,619 | 101,397 | 93,603 | 98,278 |

Sources: Office of Civil Rights (OCR) data, 1968-1986; National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Common Core of Data, 1988-2014 (regular schools only).

Note: Tarrant 1968 value is from 1967. Asterisk indicates if district formed after Jefferson County desegregation order in place.

Table 2: District-Level Racial Composition, Jefferson County, Alabama, 2014-15

| | Asian | Black | Hispanic | White | Two or More Races |
|---------------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------------------|
| Bessemer City | 0.1% | 91.1% | 6.1% | 2.2% | 0.4% |
| Birmingham City | 0.1% | 93.0% | 5.0% | 1.2% | 0.6% |
| Fairfield City | 0.1% | 97.6% | 1.7% | 0.3% | 0.3% |
| Homewood City | 2.9% | 21.8% | 11.3% | 61.9% | 1.9% |
| Hoover City | 6.5% | 24.9% | 6.2% | 59.2% | 3.0% |
| Jefferson County | 0.5% | 45.7% | 7.2% | 44.9% | 1.6% |
| Leeds City | 0.7% | 23.8% | 10.9% | 60.5% | 3.9% |
| Midfield City | 0.0% | 96.6% | 1.6% | 1.0% | 0.8% |
| Mountain Brook City | 0.8% | 0.3% | 1.3% | 96.9% | 0.6% |
| Tarrant City | 0.2% | 72.5% | 19.1% | 6.5% | 1.6% |
| Trussville City | 2.2% | 10.5% | 1.0% | 84.5% | 1.6% |
| Vestavia Hills City | 6.1% | 6.9% | 2.8% | 83.0% | 1.1% |
| Total | 1.7% | 50.3% | 5.9% | 40.5% | 1.5% |

Source: NCES Common Core, 2014-15