A dream unrealized for African-Americans in Chicago

When Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963, most blacks here were living in poor, segregated neighborhoods. They still are.

Steve Bogira



"We have come to our nation's capital to cash a check," Martin Luther King Jr. told the rapt throng on the National Mall 50 years ago.

King told the gathering of 250,000 people, most of whom were black, that the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were a promissory note "to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

"It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned," King said on that hot August afternoon. "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

King's "I Have a Dream Speech" today is celebrated more for the lyrical, hopeful portraits he ended with, of what the nation could be, than for the stinging rebukes he began with, about the nation as it was.

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, at which he gave the speech, commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. A century after that proclamation, "the Negro still is not free," King told the crowd. "The life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

It was no longer a time for patience, he said. "This sweltering summer of the colored people's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality."

In the 50 years since that sweltering summer, the chains of discrimination have loosened some, but the manacles of segregation are still taut. And as a result, for many blacks throughout the nation, the invigorating autumn has yet to appear.

"The generation of African-American children raised during the civil rights era has made virtually no advancement out of the nation's poorest neighborhoods," sociologist Patrick Sharkey writes in a new book, [*Stuck in Place*](http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo14365260.html). It's a conclusion many other researchers have arrived at as well.

Here, I look at some of the quality-of-life indicators that King hoped would improve for black Americans, and we consider the degree to which they've changed for Chicagoans in particular. It could be called a progress report, except there's little progress to report.

We asked Mayor Emanuel for his thoughts about the March on Washington anniversary. We wanted to know how far Chicago had come since then, in his view, and what more needed to be done. How did he think things were better, or not, for the city's African-Americans?

He replied with a statement:

*The arc of history has spanned fifty years since Dr. King declared "I Have a Dream," yet the echoes of his voice still ring loud and clear here in Chicago, urging us to honor the anniversary of his historic speech, not by looking back on all that has been accomplished, but by looking forward as we each pull together to bend the arc of history ever further towards justice. Dr. King's dream inspired generations of Chicagoans since, from those who marched with him to integrate education and housing in this city, including my mother, to those who broke down old barriers, especially Mayor Harold Washington, to those who have changed the course of history, none more so than President Barack Obama. As we mark this historic anniversary, we know that dream lives on, as we work together to improve education, safety, and opportunity for all our residents, and build a city for our children that is defined not by its divisions, but by what is possible when we work to overcome them.*

We followed up by asking Emanuel how he felt about the level of segregation in Chicago's neighborhoods and schools a half century after King's speech. He didn't respond.

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**Segregated neighborhoods**

"We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one," King said on that August day.

But in Chicago, that's exactly what happened.

About a quarter of the city's 3.5 million population was black in 1960. And that proportion was rising: an African-American migration from southern cities to the north was continuing, and white Chicagoans were moving to the suburbs.

As soon as blacks had started moving to Chicago in significant numbers, during World War I, the city's white residents had taken steps to hem them into certain neighborhoods—mainly a "Black Belt" on the south side, and later another ghetto on the west side. Restrictive covenants throughout much of the city prohibited white property owners from selling or renting to blacks, and where covenants weren't in force, [whites repelled black incursions with violence](http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/chicago-politics-segregation-african-american-black-white-hispanic-latino-population-census-community/Content?oid=3221712).

In 1960, 69 percent of the city's 813,000 blacks lived in just 11 of the city's 76 community areas. The total population of these neighborhoods was 94 percent black.

The African-American migration into Chicago slowed in the 1960s and '70s, but the white migration to the suburbs didn't—so the city's black neighborhoods expanded and their population thinned. "The 'ghetto' in which black Chicagoans are confined has grown to an even more enormous size, while becoming more and more hollow at its core," the Chicago Urban League said in a 1978 report.

The Urban League report noted a few pockets of racial integration in the city—in Hyde Park, the Near South Side, the Near West Side, the Near North Side, and Lincoln Park, where conscious attempts at integration had occurred, mainly as part of government urban renewal programs. And in Rogers Park and Uptown, a smattering of unplanned integration "unique to Chicago" had developed, the report said. The dominant pattern on the south and west sides, however, was for whites to move out of a neighborhood as soon as blacks moved in.

By 1980, the black migration to Chicago had all but ended, but the city's intense segregation persisted. Chicago's current population of 2.7 million is nearly equal thirds black, white, and Hispanic, but most blacks still live in a separate part of town. According to the most recent census figures, 63 percent of the city's African-Americans live in 22 community areas—18 on the south side, four on the west side—whose total population is 95 percent African-American.

Beverly and Hyde Park have been racially integrated for years now: about one-third of the residents in those south-side neighborhoods are African-American. And there's also some racial integration in Rogers Park, Uptown, the Near West Side, the Near South Side, and in Humboldt Park.

These might be significant exceptions, but, as in the late 1970s, they are exceptions. Demographers measure segregation with a "dissimilarity index," which represents the percentage of a racial group that would have to move for the group to be perfectly integrated in a city or metro area. An index above 60 represents high segregation. In 1960, Chicago's black-white dissimilarity index was 93. [It's now 84](http://igpa.uillinois.edu/system/files/Hall-Segregation-Dec2010.pdf).

A host of social scientists have demonstrated how the segregation that was imposed on African-Americans [has concentrated their poverty, intensifying the ills of their neighborhoods](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/2095942?uid=3739656&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21102540532521). For his book, Sharkey tracked the economic outcomes of a large cohort of children raised after the civil rights movement. The black children had "substantially lower" income as adults than the white children—even when they were raised by parents with similar jobs and levels of education and aspirations for their kids.

The key variable, Sharkey found, was the vastly different kinds of neighborhoods the children grew up in. "The rigid segregation of urban neighborhoods means that the black child will be raised in a residential environment with higher poverty, fewer resources, poorer schools, and more violence," Sharkey writes. "These differences have an important impact on children's opportunities as they move toward adulthood." The stark racial differences in neighborhoods "has been a primary mechanism for the reproduction of racial economic inequality in the post civil rights era."

**Employment**

The unemployment rate in Chicago was 7.6 percent for blacks and 2.3 percent for whites in 1968 (the first year for which I could find unemployment data here by race). The black-white employment gap is nothing new, and it's not just a Chicago problem: nationally, the black rate has been nearly double and occasionally two and a half times the white rate since the 1960s. In 1963, the black unemployment rate was 10.8 percent, the white rate 5 percent; and most recently, in July, the [national rates were 12.6 percent for blacks and 6.6 percent for whites](http://www.epi.org/publication/unfinished-march-overview/).

Unemployment today is especially high for blacks in big cities, and that's certainly true in Chicago. Last year, the [rate for blacks here was 19.5 percent, the rate for whites 8.1 percent](http://www.bls.gov/opub/gp/pdf/gp12_27.pdf).

Urban African-American neighborhoods took a nosedive in the 1970s and '80s, with a startling loss of jobs leading the way. Businesses moved to the suburbs, where land was cheap and crime rates low. Between 1967 and 1987, Chicago lost an incredible 60 percent of its manufacturing jobs—more than a half million.

In 1986, the [*Tribune* documented the change in North Lawndale, a west-side neighborhood](http://www.amazon.com/American-Millstone-Examination-Permanent-Underclass/dp/0809249316). In 1950, the community had been 87 percent white; by 1960, it was 91 percent black. The Hawthorne plant of Western Electric, which had once employed 43,000, phased out operations and closed in 1984. An International Harvester plant that had employed 14,000 shut its doors in the late 1960s. The world headquarters for Sears, Roebuck, which had employed 10,000, moved most of its offices downtown in 1973. Smaller businesses left after riots following King's assassination in 1968. By 1986, North Lawndale had 66,000 residents but only one bank and one supermarket. It also had 48 state lottery agents, 50 currency exchanges, and 99 liquor stores and bars.

Public transportation to the suburban jobs was poor. The jobs that remained in the city increasingly required at least some college education, and many black Chicago residents hadn't finished high school.

In the 1980s, some African-Americans who could afford to move to the suburbs did so, which made indigence even more prevalent in the communities they left. By the early 1990s, a "new urban poverty" gripped segregated neighborhoods in Chicago and other cities, the sociologist William Julius Wilson wrote in his 1996 book [*When Work Disappears*](http://www.amazon.com/When-Work-Disappears-World-Urban/dp/0679724176). A "substantial majority" of adults in these neighborhoods were either unemployed or had dropped out of the labor force altogether. In a dozen poor black community areas on Chicago's south and west sides, only one in three adults had held a job in a typical week in 1990, Wilson wrote.

A stronger national economy improved circumstances for black women in the 1990s, but not for black men. Many of them were in no position to take advantage of the boom—they'd turned to the drug trade for income in the 1980s, and [by the '90s a significant proportion was locked up](http://newjimcrow.com/).

As bad as that current 19.5 percent unemployment rate is for Chicago blacks, it understates their plight. It counts only those in the labor force, excluding the imprisoned. It also excludes "discouraged" workers—those who've given up looking for work because they believe no jobs are available for them.

The mass incarceration of African-Americans not only eliminates them from the labor pool when they're in prison, it also makes them less employable when they get out, because employers are disinclined to hire ex-offenders. A study of Milwaukee employers in 2003 indicated the [employers were more willing to hire white male ex-offenders than black male ex-offenders with the same credentials](http://www.princeton.edu/~pager/pager_ajs.pdf). In fact, the employers were slightly more willing to hire white male ex-offenders than black males with no criminal records. The discouragement of "discouraged" black workers is not without reason.

**Economic status**

"The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity," King said on that August afternoon in 1963.

In 1960, 29.7 percent of black Chicago families were living in poverty, compared with 7.4 percent of white families. Median income was 62 percent higher for white families than for black families ($7,700 versus $4,800). The city's ten poorest community areas were all overwhelmingly black.

In 1983, 20 years after King's speech, the Chicago Urban League analyzed socioeconomic indicators from the 1980 census—unemployment, female-headed households with children, persons in poverty, high school graduation rates—and found disparities between blacks and whites in the Chicago area to be greater than in any major metropolitan area in the nation. "No other urban center even comes close to matching this ignominious record," the Urban League said in its report.

The report attributed the disparities to the city's extreme racial segregation, and the machine politics which for decades had "funneled most resources to non-black sections of the community." Whatever the causes, one thing was clear, the report said: "Chicagoans need to recognize the severity of the racial inequities which exist in this city, and we must begin to make a concerted effort to reduce this gap in the years immediately ahead."

Nationally, the number of high-poverty neighborhoods—areas with poverty rates of at least 40 percent—doubled in the 1970s and '80s, then [declined by 24 percent in the 1990s](http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2003/05/demographics-jargowsky). But the number of such neighborhoods has been climbing again, according to a [2008 Brookings Institution study](http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2008/8/08%20concentrated%20poverty%20kneebone/concentrated_poverty.pdf).

And today in Chicago, 30 years after the Urban League exhorted the city to reduce the socioeconomic disparities between black and white residents, 34.1 percent of black Chicagoans are living in poverty, and 10.9 percent of whites. In 2010, median income of white households was twice that of black households ($58,752 versus $29,371). The seven poorest community areas today are all overwhelmingly African-American. Twenty percent of their residents are living in *extreme* poverty—their [incomes are less than half of the poverty line](http://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2013/08/05/should-we-be-giddy-about-our-cities-when-so-many-are-suffering-in-them).

And African-Americans in Chicago haven’t been gaining ground economically of late. Their poverty rate climbed from 29.4 percent in 2000, to 31.5 percent in 2007, to the current 34.1 percent.

Child poverty also has been rising for African-Americans in Chicago, according to census data compiled for us by the Social IMPACT research center of the Heartland Alliance. Now one of every two black children in Chicago is poor, compared with one of every 11 white children.

Sharkey's study of post-civil rights children found most white children to have been upwardly mobile economically—whereas most black children were actually worse off than their parents had been. This, again, is likely due to neighborhood disparities, he observes: a black family that makes economic gains finds it hard to sustain them in areas of high crime, low property values, and inferior schools—which characterizes the neighborhoods most black children and almost no white children grow up in. "The ideal of America as the land of equal opportunity is simply not supported by the evidence," Sharkey writes.

**Schools**

In the mid-1960s, Chicago's public school enrollment was nearly half white and half black—but the white students went to schools that were nearly all white, and the black students went to schools that were nearly all black. And the black enrollment was rising, while the white enrollment was declining: white families were moving to the suburbs or putting their children in private schools.

By 1980, when the city finally signed a consent decree to desegregate its schools, it was far too late: the [white proportion was down to 19 percent and still falling](http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/school-desegregation/Content?oid=871708).

Last year, only 9 percent of CPS students were white. Forty-four percent were Hispanic, and 42 percent were African-American. Eighty-seven percent were from low-income families.

With that composition, it's not surprising that the [vast majority of African-American children in Chicago's public schools are still hypersegregated](http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/segregated-schools-desegregation-city-suburbs-history-solutions/Content?oid=9992386). In 2013, 86 percent of African-American students attended schools that were at least 90 percent black and Hispanic. More than two-thirds of African-American students—68 percent—were in schools that were at least 90 percent African-American.

Reading scores in the black schools of the 1960s were far below scores in the white schools—and African-American students are still way behind. The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago reported in 2011 that graduation rates for CPS students rose from 48 percent in 1997 to 66 percent in 2010. But they were the lowest and grew the least for African-Americans. The Consortium also found that between 1990 and 2009, racial gaps in achievement grew, with white, Asian, and Hispanic students making modest gains in reading while black students showed "virtually no improvements."

**Realizing the dream**

Given how deep and long-standing the disparities, fixing them is a monumental task. But it's not an impossible one. I write about [potential approaches here](http://www.chicagoreader.com/Bleader/archives/2013/08/23/fifty-years-after-i-have-a-dream-time-for-a-real-war-on-poverty).

The first steps, of course, are recognizing the extent of the crisis and committing fully to addressing it. For decades now, African-Americans in Chicago and many other big cities have been living in intolerable circumstances, or circumstances that would be deemed intolerable if whites were living in them. And their cities and states and nation continue to tolerate their plight.

"We have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition," King said at the Lincoln Memorial 50 years ago.

It still is.