Economic segregation in San Antonio: how we got here, is it real?

Christine Drennon, For the Express-News  Published 12:00 am CST, Saturday, December 23, 2017

Day workers flag a passing truck while waiting for jobs at the corner of North Frio and West Houston Streets in 2013. San Antonio’s economic segregation did not grow in the same way as a whole lot of other cities.

Recently, San Antonio received the distinguished recognition of being the most economically segregated city in the United States. In turn, local news sources repeat these findings incessantly. In this age of statistics, incessant reporting, and races to the top, San Antonio seems to lead. These studies and their repeated reporting have led to community-wide conversations about our future.

I have two concerns that I wish to share here: how did we get so segregated, and do these analyses reflect our situation accurately? Both lead to conversations about what we can do.
How we got here

On March 19, 2016 the Express-News quoted Steve Glickman, co-founder and executive director of the Economic Innovation Group and author of one of the studies: “These communities (in San Antonio) look like two different countries.”

How did this happen? How did our city come to be so segregated that it seems our neighborhoods do not even belong to the same city? To answer that, we need to look closely at the history of our neighborhoods — how they were created, for whom, and by whom.

Neighborhood filtering models, used to explain the life cycle of any neighborhood, usually begin with the construction of high quality housing on the urban fringe. High income families move into that housing, leaving their newly vacated homes to others, often of a slightly lower income bracket — and so on and so on until the oldest housing often houses the poorest members of a community (gentrification is the latest phase of this process, as those high-income households choose to move back in).

This neighborhood filtering model is so entrenched and taken for granted that we (in the United States) have historically housed our lower-income households in this ‘filtered down’ housing. This is the model used to describe most neighborhoods in the United States, but in the case of San Antonio, the model may be slightly flawed, for we have neighborhoods of entrenched poverty and entrenched wealth, that no filtering process has produced.

In fact, the Express-News reported that “for the past 50 years, 78207 has been defined by poverty and a sheer lack of opportunity.” That zip code, 78207 (for instance), isn’t the case of a neighborhood filtering through progressively poorer families; nor is it the case of a deteriorating housing stock that has passed to predominantly rental housing (although both are true). Instead, these parts of the city have been home to poor families for most of the 20th century, in which case, traditional filtering models are not that helpful in understanding this urban landscape.

In the case of San Antonio, it is the assumption of high quality new developments that
is troublesome.

In San Antonio, as in other southern cities where nonwhites were settling as quickly as Anglo families (in the early decades of the 20th century), many of the neighborhoods developing on the (then) urban fringe (today’s inner city neighborhoods) were deed restricted, prohibiting people of color from moving into them.

Close by, also developing along the urban fringe, were areas that developed more haphazardly. While still subject to a platting process, these developments intended for nonwhites were smaller — often only a few city blocks — with more lots per block (thus guaranteeing smaller houses and more density) and little room for public infrastructure (sidewalks, drainage, lighting, even streets).

By 1940, when census takers went house by house, recording names, ownership, and race, restrictive covenants had done their job. Unrestricted developments were entirely nonwhite, while restricted neighborhoods were exclusively Anglo.

By that time, the federal government had gotten involved in the process by assigning color codes to neighborhoods, thus signaling to banks what neighborhoods were risk-free for investment (mostly in the form of mortgages) and which were not safe investments. Those assignments were based on two things: the quality of the housing stock and the race and ethnicity of its inhabitants.

High quality housing inhabited by Anglo families was coded green while deteriorating housing sheltering nonwhites was coded red — it was redlined. In the years following, little investment flowed into these neighborhoods, so their slow deterioration was guaranteed. And with that deterioration of the housing stock, lower-income families moved in.

School desegregation exacerbated this situation, further segregating our inner-city, as any remaining white families left the areas for the new neighborhoods developing on the ever-expanding urban fringe, taking their accumulated wealth with them.

Because so many social services (most notably schools) are funded based on geography, services in our inner-city neighborhoods languished — at least until 1992 when single member city council districts were created. But by then, we had inherited
housing that had deteriorated for years, with little ability for investment or substantial upkeep.

Today, those are our neighborhoods that have given us the most distinguished rank of the most-segregated city. Ironically, many of these inner-city neighborhoods are now among the most desireable, as their proximity to downtown makes them a truly valuable asset to a new demographic. These are our most vulnerable neighborhoods and communities that we must protect.

So while we spent much of the 20th century sorting our population by race, ethnicity, and wealth (and used both legal and nonlegal means to do so), now we find ourselves in the national spotlight as deeply segregated. No surprise. And as we gather the interest of the national think tanks who want to study and measure us, and the local press who repeats their findings, we must bring our own insights of local conditions to these analyses.

**The segregation analysis**

At the same time as everyone has been on their indignant high horses, I have struggled with the analysis that is reported by the think tanks and repeated incessantly locally. I am originally from Rochester, New York, and was blessed to get my current job at Trinity University, so I have called San Antonio home for the past 15 years.

But like all of us, my mind is imprinted with the landscape I grew up on, so mine remains the Rochester landscape; it continues to serve as a benchmark for understanding new places. Upon hearing that San Antonio received the most distinguished first place in the segregation wars, immediately my mind went back to Rochester. Rochester is one of the poorest cities in the country (ranks 5th), yet it is fairly homogeneously poor and low-income. It is surrounded by middle and high income suburbs, but the city itself is homogeneously low income.

San Antonio sprawls forever, but in that sprawl are a plethora of neighborhoods, including low and high income. Yes, they are spatially separated, but they all fall within the jurisdiction of the city of San Antonio.

The analysis offered by the think tanks — and repeated by us — fails to distinguish
between these different forms of political geography. Is this just an academic exercise? Not at all, because it reveals strategies that are available to us that are not available to others.

So when Steve Glickman, of the EIG group, says that our neighborhoods seem as if they are from different countries, that phrase actually described Rochester much more accurately than it does San Antonio, for here they are very much part of one city, and thus under one jurisdiction that can be pressured to address the issue.

**The “equity lens”**

In this era of recycling the work of others, we’ve become complacent. One recent article suggests that we should address our segregation through the inequities in educational attainments — and of course we should, but schools and school funding are under the jurisdiction of the state, so there is little we can do locally to redistribute funds between our wealthy and poor school districts.

But because our neighborhoods are all within the city of San Antonio, we can do precisely that, and Rochester cannot. Rochester’s wealthy live in the suburbs or within the county but not within the city. San Antonio’s high income neighborhoods lie within the city limits, albeit far from the lower-income neighborhoods.

So what? We all pay property taxes into the same coffer. That means that we can redistribute funds from one area to another, and Rochester cannot. In this way, property wealth may rise in our poorer school districts — producing a real redistribution of wealth. Which is precisely what the current mayor and City Council has voted to do, although on a very small scale.

The ‘equity lens’ can only be deployed in a situation where there is wealth to redistribute, for that’s precisely what it requires.

Yes, we have been deemed “most segregated city”, but unlike others, we can do something about it at the local level. That’s the real challenge; and for us to be a bit more critical when using the analyses of those who don’t know this place as well as we do.

*Christine Drennon is an associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Trinity*
University, with expertise in urban geography and community development.