



Is there “white flight” into private schools? New evidence from High School and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

In the U.S., white parents may choose to send their children to private schools in response to the local concentration of minority schoolchildren, commonly referred to as “white flight”. This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing new evidence on white flight from the data set High School and Beyond (HSB). I find that a one-percentage-point increase in the county (metropolitan area, or MA) level minority share of school-age population increases the private schooling probability of white students by 0.2 (0.27) percentage points. White flight appears to be more sensitive to the concentration of black schoolchildren than to any other minority concentration. White families also appear to respond more strongly to the concentration of poor minorities than to non-poor minorities. Results also suggest substantial variation in the rate of white flight across different areas of the country. Finally, when minority shares are measured at the county level, there is some evidence of increasing rate of white flight from the local concentration of black schoolchildren as the black share increases.

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1. Introduction

One important factor that may influence the private school attendance decisions of white students in the U.S. and has strong policy implications is the possible aversion of white families to the concentration of minority schoolchildren in local public schools. White parents may choose to send their children to private schools in response to minority concentration, commonly referred to as “white flight”. The growing recognition of white flight brings about the fears that its existence may threaten the long-run efficacy of integration policies and lead to virtual resegregation of schools in the U.S. Clotfelter (1976) examines the role of school racial composition in the demand for private schooling by whites. Using a sample of U.S. metropolitan areas (MAs) in 1960 and 1970, he finds that an increase in the proportion of minorities in public schools of 10% is associated

with increases in the proportion of whites in private schools of 1–8%. Evidence on white flight can also be found in Conlon and Kimenyi (1991), Lankford and Wyckoff (1992), Lankford, Lee, and Wyckoff (1995), Clotfelter (2001) and Fairlie and Resch (2002).¹

This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing new evidence on white flight from the data set High School and Beyond (HSB). The HSB sample allows me to examine white flight for high school sophomores and seniors in 1980. A recent study on white flight by Fairlie and Resch (2002) focuses on high school sophomores in 1990 sampled in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), another survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), a decade after the HSB survey. Similar to the NELS sample, the HSB sample has an

¹ Relatedly, Fairlie (2002) finds some evidence of Latino flight into private schools from the concentration of black schoolchildren. Betts and Fairlie (2003) report some empirical evidence on the hypothesis that native-born American families respond to inflows of immigrants by sending their children to private schools.

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advantage over many national data sets because it includes information on many very useful individual level characteristics, such as religious affiliation and cognitive test score which can be used as a proxy for cognitive ability. Because the NCES conducted the HSB and NELS surveys in a consistent way and intended to allow researchers to make comparisons of U.S. high school students over a decade, it is quite interesting to study the variability in responses of white families to minority concentration over time. An increase in the rate of white flight over the decade may indicate deepened aversion of white parents to minority concentration, whereas a fall may suggest the opposite.

Using the HSB sample, this paper supports the white flight hypothesis by finding that a one-percentage-point increase in the county (MA) level minority share of school-age population increases the white private schooling probability by 0.2 (0.27) percentage points. White flight appears to be more sensitive to the concentration of black schoolchildren than to any other minority concentration. For example, a one-standard-deviation increase in the county (MA) level black share of school-age population increases the white private schooling probability by 7.2 (8.1) percentage points. White families also appear to respond more strongly to the concentration of poor minorities than to non-poor minorities.

Some studies in the private schooling literature use national data sets, such as the first sample in Clotfelter (1976), Lankford et al. (1995), Figlio and Stone (2001), Clotfelter (2001) and Fairlie and Resch (2002), but there are also many studies restricting their attention on a specific state. For example, the second sample in Clotfelter (1976) focuses on Mississippi around 1970, Conlon and Kimenyi (1991) focus on Mississippi in 1980, Lankford and Wyckoff (1992) on New York state in 1980, and Buddin, Cordes, and Kirby (1998) on California in 1990. Using California data, Buddin et al. (1998) find that private schooling rates of all students are rather insensitive to the percentage of minorities in public schools. In contrast, Lankford and Wyckoff (1992) find from New York state data that parents are more likely to send their children to private elementary schools when black students make up a larger proportion of the public school population, although they find the opposite effect for private high school enrollments. Therefore, the effect of minority concentration on private schooling may vary over time or across areas.

The hypothesis is that white parents in some areas of the country may have less deep aversion to minority concentration than in other areas. It is possible that the variation in the rate of white flight across studies may reflect in part the geographical heterogeneity in responses of white families to minority concentration. To capture such heterogeneity, I estimate an additional set of probit regressions, allowing for minority share interacted with region dummies. The results indicate substantial variability in the rate of white flight across different regions. In particular, white flight appears less prominent in the West region but is more pronounced in the Northeast/South/Midwest regions.

Clotfelter (1976, 2001) pays special attention to the question of whether there is a threshold or “tipping” point in white flight from public to private schools in response to minority concentration. As a robustness check, I allow

for nonlinearity in minority shares of school-age population for various ethnicity groups. Because Fairlie and Resch (2002) are concerned about the arbitrariness in creating the thresholds, I use two different forms of nonlinearity for minority shares, a fourth order polynomial and a semiparametric specification. Results using different nonlinear specifications produce similar results and suggest that, when minority shares are measured at the county level, there is some evidence of increasing rate of white flight from black concentration as the black share increases. The next section describes the HSB sample. Section 3 discusses empirical results and examines white flight, white flight from different minority groups and the geographical heterogeneity and nonlinearity in white flight. The final section concludes.

2. Data

High School and Beyond is a national survey of U.S. high school sophomores and seniors in 1980 and is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics. To study whether white flight exists, it is natural to restrict the sample to include only white, non-Hispanic students. To check the robustness of my results, I employ two different measures of school and community characteristics, those at the county level and those at the metropolitan area level. I report descriptive statistics of the dependent and explanatory variables in Table 1. The first (second) sample uses county (MA) level school and community characteristics and includes 27,011 (20,170) individuals from 504 counties (166 MAs).

Except for school and community characteristics, all variables are measured at the individual level. For example, descriptive statistics of the dependent variable suggest that 11% of whites in the HSB sample are in private schools in 1980. Fairlie and Resch (2002) report from the National Education Longitudinal Study a private schooling rate of 11.2% for white sophomores in 1990. The HSB sample allows me to examine white flight for students in 1980, a decade before the NELS sample. It is quite interesting to study the variability in responses of white families to minority concentration over time by comparing results from the HSB and NELS samples. An increase in the rate of white flight over time may indicate a deepened aversion of white parents to minority concentration, whereas a fall may suggest the opposite.

Like the NELS sample, the HSB sample has an advantage over many national data sets because it includes information on several very useful individual level characteristics, such as religious affiliation and cognitive test score which can be used as a proxy for cognitive ability. After collecting the individual level characteristics, I append school and community characteristics at the county or MA level to individual level variables. The public school student-to-teacher ratio variable is from the Common Core of Data (CCD) which provides information on the public school universe between 1980 and 1981. The private school student-to-teacher ratio is from the Universe of Private Schools, another NCES administered survey in 1980. Both of the public and private school student-to-teacher ratio variables are available at the county and MA levels, but

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