Overview

While school choice policies are now ubiquitous and often presented as a strategy for addressing persistent racial disparities in education, there is concern that such policies may maintain or increase such disparities due to resource hoarding by advantaged families or increased racial segregation (Davis 2014; Roda and Wells 2013). More specifically, white families may use charters to exit from racially diverse schools to maintain status hierarchies (Renzulli and Evans 2005). Using a group threat/status anxiety framework (Bobo and Hutchings 1996), I hypothesize that exposure to increased racial diversification may induce white families to enroll their children in charter schools. I distinguish between proximal exposure, where racial diversification occurs in neighboring school districts, and direct exposure, where racial diversification occurs within local traditional public schools.

I find evidence that:
1. both proximal and direct exposure are associated with both increased founding of charter schools and increased white enrollment in charter schools;
2. this is concentrated in non-urban areas; and
3. threat-induced white enrollment is associated with increased racial segregation.

Data

Panel of California school district data from 2000-2015 (n = 12,603 district-by-year observations; 990 unique districts)

Sources: The Common Core of Data; Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates (both accessed via the Urban Institutes API); NCES EDGE database

Charter schools in California:
• Law enacted in 1992
• Authorization occurs at the district level
• In 2000, ~2% of students were enrolled in charters
• By 2015, ~10% were enrolled in charters

Methods

1. Proximal status threat (Andrews and Seguin 2015)
   \[ \text{ProxThreat}_{ij} = \beta_j \cdot \gamma_j \]
   where \( \beta_j \) and \( \gamma_j \) are proximal threat for district and charter school, respectively.

2. Direct status threat
   \[ \text{DirThreat}_{ij} = \frac{\text{BlackPS}_{ij} \cdot \text{HispTS}_{ij}}{\text{TotalBlack}_{ij} \cdot \text{TotalHispanic}_{ij}} \]

3. Racial segregation (white isolation) (Massey and Denton 1988)
   \[ \text{WhiteIsolation}_{ij} = \sum_{k \neq a} \frac{\left( \frac{X_{k}^{w}}{X_{a}^{w}} \right) \left( \frac{X_{a}^{t}}{X_{i}^{t}} \right)}{\text{TotalWhite}_{ij}} \]
   where \( \alpha_{ij} \) is the white enrollment in a school, \( X_{ ij } \) is the total white enrollment in the district \( i \) is in, and \( t_{ij} \) is the total enrollment in the district.

Analytic models

Descriptive Analysis

Summary and implications

• Both direct and proximal exposure to students of color appear to motivate white students to leave traditional public schools for charter schools.
• This process appears to increase district segregation—white students are more isolated from students of color.
• Findings suggest that white families may use charter schools to maintain exclusive access to educational goods—aligning with other research showing that white families have a preference for schools with more white students.

References


