The New York Times

Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation

Why well-off black families end up living in poorer areas than white families with similar or even lower incomes.

By John Eligon and Robert Gebeloff

Aug. 20, 2016

MILWAUKEE — Their daughter was sick and they needed family around to help care for her, so JoAnne and Maanaan Sabir took an unexpected detour.

They had spent years blowing past mileposts: earning advanced degrees and six-figure incomes, buying a 2,500-square-foot Victorian with hardwood floors. Yet here they were, both 37, moving to a corner of town pocked by empty lots, cramming into an apartment above Ms. Sabir's mother, in the very duplex that Ms. Sabir's grandparents had bought six decades earlier.

Their new dwelling was in a part of the Lindsay Heights neighborhood where more than one in three families lives in poverty; gunshots were too often a part of the nighttime soundtrack. They planned to leave once their daughter, Ameera, was healthy.

But then, reminding them of why they feel at home in communities like this one, their new neighbors started frequently checking on Ameera: Is she doing O.K.? And on their son, Taj: When's his next basketball game? Mr. Sabir's car stalled in the middle of the street one night, and it was the young men too often stereotyped as suspicious who helped him push it home. So many welcoming black faces like their own, they thought.

"It felt like that's where we should be," Ms. Sabir said.

Now, two years later, Ameera, 14, is healthy. And the Sabirs have not left. They have, in fact, only strengthened their resolve to stay after a fatal police shooting last weekend led to fiery unrest that was also fueled by frustrations over race and segregation. Rooted where they are, the Sabirs point to a broad yet little explored fact of American segregation: Affluent black families, freed from the restrictions of low income, often end up living in poor and segregated communities anyway.

It is a national phenomenon challenging the popular assumption that segregation is more about class than about race, that when black families earn more money, some ideal of post-racial integration will inevitably be reached.

In fact, a New York Times analysis of 2014 census figures shows that income alone cannot explain, nor would it likely end, the segregation that has defined American cities and suburbs for generations.

The choices that black families make today are inevitably constrained by a legacy of racism that prevented their ancestors from buying quality housing and then passing down wealth that might have allowed today's generation to move into more stable communities. And even when black households try to cross color boundaries, they are not always met with open arms: Studies have shown that white people prefer to live in communities where there are fewer black people, regardless of their income.

The result: Nationally, black and white families of similar incomes still live in separate worlds.

In many of America's largest metropolitan areas, including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, black families making $100,000 or more are more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods than even white households making less than $25,000. This is particularly true in areas with a long history of residential segregation, like metropolitan Milwaukee.

In one neighborhood on Milwaukee's predominantly black north side, that means the appearance of a new 4,000-square-foot home owned by a black energy executive and her husband, who host political fund-raisers with valet parking. Nearby, a financial adviser and his wife are stuck in the starter home they bought about 10 years ago, because it lost value and they couldn't sell it. Up the street, there's an engineer, living with her family, who said she stayed in the city for its amenities and to send the message, "We didn't want to run away."

The Sabirs share that mix of civic-minded motivation, and limitations. They are successful small-business owners with college degrees, yet even their choices have been circumscribed. The Victorian home they bought a decade ago, which they are now renting out, is in a majority black neighborhood where poverty has increased, damaging their investment. Their current neighborhood, where the duplex is, has a median household income of just $34,000 a year, or around $20,000 less than what's typical for the region.

It's one of many ways that living around people whom they best relate to means wrestling day and night with the cumulative effects of racism.

Decades of Hostility

The burning cars and buildings, the people throwing rocks and bottles at police officers in riot gear — it was all happening last Saturday as Maanaan and JoAnne Sabir were settling in for the night just a few miles down the road.

The 23-year-old man who had been shot by a black officer had ignored orders to drop a gun as he fled on foot after being pulled over in his car, the police said.

As his wife flicked through accounts of the raucous uprising on social media, Mr. Sabir could not help but think that the public response was years in the making. It was Milwaukee's — America's — history and maintenance of racist policies, through housing discrimination, divestment of black communities, and policing, all coming to a head.

"You're asking us to do the impossible, which is to tolerate a systemic demoralization of our own livelihood," Mr. Sabir said.

A 4-year-old in a North Side neighborhood of Milwaukee. His mother said she was trying to educate him about violence and what it meant to be street smart. Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

Black families in Milwaukee have been confronting hostility for decades. Zeddie Quitman Hyler directly challenged housing segregation in 1955 when he began laying the foundation for a house on an open patch of land in the white western suburb of Wauwatosa.

A postal worker and World War II veteran from rural Mississippi, Mr. Hyler was the first black man to try to build there, and his efforts were not appreciated. He returned to his construction site one day to find the frame damaged. He fixed it, but when he came back again, it had burned.

So he enlisted several friends to camp out with him at the construction site one evening, rifles in hand, ready to turn away intruders. The vandals never returned, and Mr. Hyler finished building his house, which he lived in for nearly half a century until his death in 2004.

While Mr. Hyler was branching out, Ms. Sabir's grandparents found themselves falling into the familiar cycle of segregation. Migrants from the South, they spent about 10 years trying to buy a house at a time when black families were overtly steered to particular blocks. Eventually, a family member who was a real estate agent worked her connections, and they landed the duplex on the corner of North 17th Street and North Avenue in the mid-1950s. The neighborhood was evolving from one that had been flush with synagogues and restaurants selling matzo ball soup.

They were caught in the middle of white flight.

The census tract where Ms. Sabir's grandparents settled was entirely white in 1950 except for the two people that the census listed as black and the six listed as "other." By 1960, however, 2,344 black people called the area home, accounting for 65 percent of its population.

Within a few years, Milwaukee's economy would start tanking. Tens of thousands of manufacturing jobs in the city were eliminated. Property values fell, while housing policies made it nearly impossible for black families to obtain loans and move to the suburbs, where many jobs were being relocated.

That same pattern of redlining, in which banks choke off lending to minorities and minority communities, has shaped New York, Chicago and other cities, but the impact in Milwaukee proved especially severe, in part because black migrants began arriving in droves just as the economic structure that was supposed to buoy them was disappearing. The shifts ensured that no enclave for affluent black people was ever developed here.

Black residents and leaders tried to fight back. In 1962, Vel Phillips, the city's first black alderwoman, proposed a fair housing ordinance. Her colleagues voted unanimously against it four times in the 1960s.

A car and home in the Lindsay Heights neighborhood of Milwaukee, where, according to some residents, 16th Street is a known “dope and prostitution street.”
Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

Luther Barnett, 96, at the Lindsay Heights home he bought in 1982. Mr. Barnett, who came to Milwaukee in 1952 and sold life insurance, said he has seen the community change a lot, but still felt safe there. Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

Activists took to the streets in the summer of 1967 for 200 consecutive days of fair housing protests, and were sometimes greeted with racial slurs, eggs and rocks as they crossed the Menomonee River, via the 16th Street Viaduct, into the white South Side.

The Common Council eventually ratified a fair housing law in 1968, weeks after the federal government passed its landmark measure.

The racial dividing lines were already drawn, however, and barriers to black upward mobility remained. Even the neighborhood where the baseball slugger Hank Aaron moved in the late 1950s could not avoid a downward spiral. While the black population in the Rufus King area grew from 0.4 percent in 1960 to 89 percent in 1980, its median home value dropped from 9 percent above the city's median to 23 percent below it, according to "Milwaukee: City of Neighborhoods," a book by John Gurda.

Those historic dynamics of race and housing have not disappeared, either. As recently as 2006, a city government report found that affluent, nonwhite Milwaukeeans were 2.7 times likelier to be denied home loans than white people with similar incomes.

Many black people here still view the suburbs as hostile toward them. Just six years ago, the New Berlin mayor's initial support for an affordable housing project in the nearly 93 percent white suburb was met with threats, including a sign in his yard that read, "nigger lover."

New Berlin blocked the housing development, and was sued by the federal government, which accused the city of racial bias.

Few people around here are surprised, then, that only 11.1 percent of African-Americans in the region live in the suburbs, the lowest rate of black suburbanization among the 50 largest metropolitan areas in the country, according to a soon-to-be released study by Marc V. Levine, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Milwaukee itself, which is nearly two-thirds nonwhite, has never elected a black mayor. As for Wauwatosa, the suburb that Mr. Hyler changed a generation ago, it is still 90 percent white.

Where to Feel at Home?

The Sabirs are trying to help their children maneuver through this complicated racial landscape.

Taj and Ameera go to a Catholic private school in Milwaukee where most of the students are white, but return to a Muslim household in a neighborhood where most people look like them. Both environments present difficulties.

At school, the Sabir children have heard a teacher play down slavery, and classmates stereotype black neighborhoods as bad and drug infested. On their block, where the sidewalks are cracked and some empty lots have been turned into gardens, they occasionally see drugs and fights.

They often find their worldviews out of sync with those around them. When Taj was visiting a white classmate in Wauwatosa in May, the friend wanted to go outside to play with Nerf guns. But Taj recalled the police killing another black boy with a toy gun — 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland — and said that he had to be cautious about what he did outside. The police did not always have his best interests at heart, Taj explained, prompting his friend's mother to respond that the police were good.

It's at times like those when JoAnne and Maanaan Sabir are happy that their children can come home, see the nuance of the black struggle and work to change it — as when Ameera helped petition to prevent a liquor store from opening in the neighborhood. Or when the children volunteer at a food bank down the block.

Children awaiting the arrival of a Salvation Army food truck, which passes through with ham sandwiches, fruit and milk. Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

A man who gave his name as Lafi, with a group of his friends on 17th Street. He said he had tried out for parts in a few movies, but most of his life has been spent on the stoop and picking up his three children in the afternoon. Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

Still, their parents can't help but flirt with the possibilities of another life. That's what they were doing one evening in late June as they cruised through the plush suburbs, partaking in a semiregular ritual of soaking in the Lake Michigan mansions and manicured lawns and wondering about life there. They rolled past children riding their bicycles alone at around 9 p.m., and Ms. Sabir marveled that they could do that.

She thought back to when Taj, 12, had confronted her a few days earlier. He had asked for permission to ride his eight-speed bike around the block. Ms. Sabir could not go out to supervise him, so she said no.

"Are you finally going to admit that we live in a dangerous community?" he said.

Ms. Sabir pondered the question. She is trained for these moments, with a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in administrative social work, but she struggled. "We have challenges like every other community has challenges," she told him, adding, "You're going to have to figure out the best way to negotiate those challenges."

A Sense of Otherness

X’antony Brookens, seated, with his wife, Latisha Spence-Brookens and their children, X’antony Jr., above right, and Zaria, at their home in Milwaukee’s North Side.
Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

Managing sometimes means moving on. And in Milwaukee’s circle of affluent black professionals, that sometimes means decamping for majority white areas in the city or the suburbs.

That’s where Latisha Spence-Brookens and X’antony Brookens Sr. found themselves five years ago after their North Milwaukee neighborhood rapidly deteriorated during the housing crash.

They rolled into their new bungalow-style rental house in the village of Whitefish Bay, a suburb perched on Lake Michigan with a population so white (90 percent) that it has earned the moniker Whitefolks Bay. And then they looked around in amazement. People were walking. Everywhere.

Some strolled past the two-story homes with red, white and blue bunting on the balconies. Others strolled along the main thoroughfare with a Starbucks, a sidewalk cafe, a store selling handblown glass, and a supermarket featuring live lobster, a full-service florist and

Champagne caper vinaigrette.

The Milwaukee neighborhood they had left behind, which was nearly 93 percent black, wasn't much for this kind of leisure. After they bought a two-bedroom home in 2008 for $98,000, the effects of the housing market collapse spread through the area. Homes were abandoned. Crime took over.

Their son, X'antony Jr., now 18, was walking home one afternoon, toting a plastic Walmart bag with a Barbie he had just bought for his little sister, Zaria, when a man approached him with a large rock in his hand.

"Give me all your money or I'm going to bash your head in with this rock," the man told him.

X'antony Jr. hesitated.

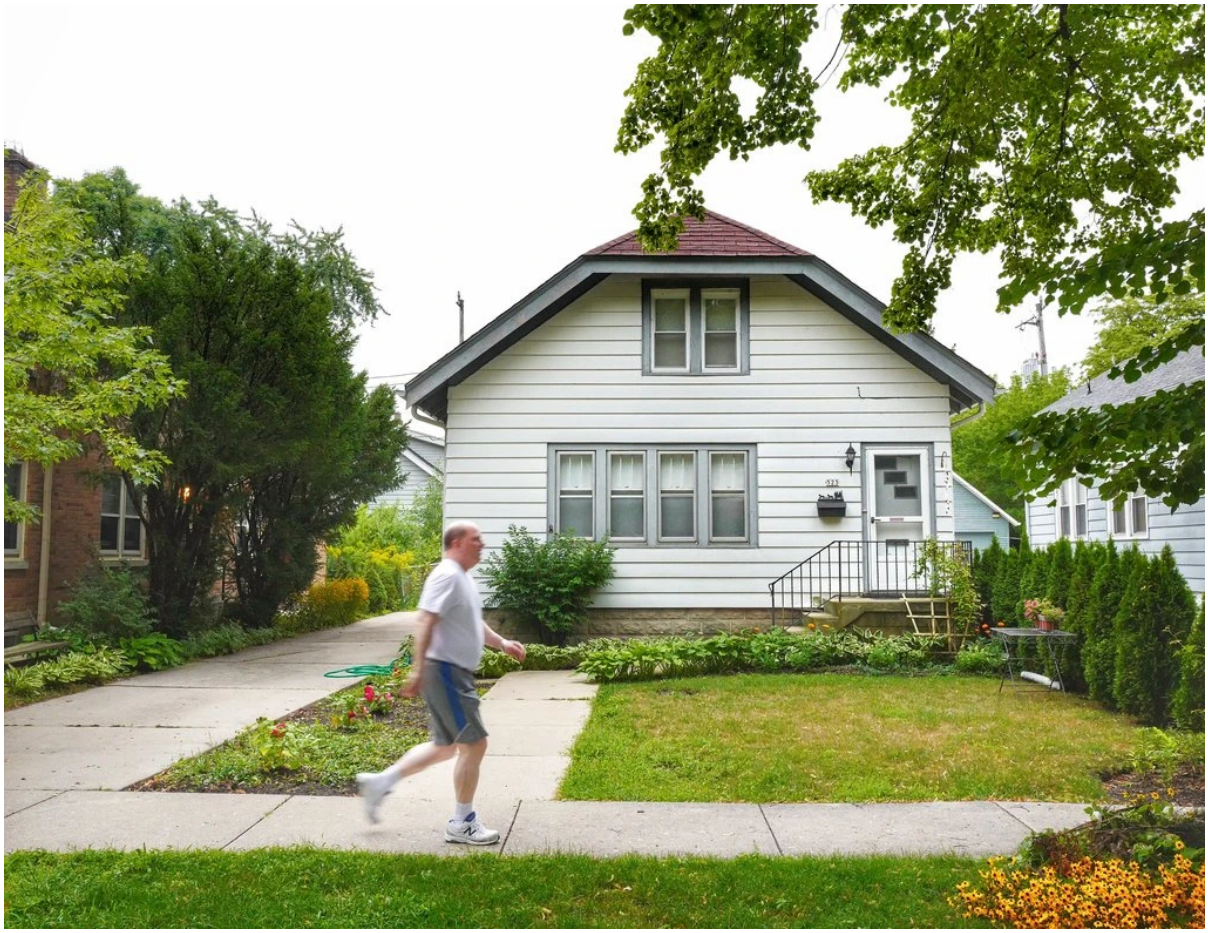
"I didn't know what to do," he recalled. "This was my first time being robbed."

So he offered $5 to the robber, who took it and let X'antony Jr. keep the Barbie.

For X'antony Sr., 48, the last straw came when a neighbor was held up at gunpoint as she came home with her two toddlers. It was too dangerous to stay, he thought.

Their home value had plummeted by some 75 percent by then. They had no equity to buy up. So they walked away from the mortgage and rented a house in Whitefish Bay for $1,450 a month, nearly one and a half times what they had been paying for the home they owned.

But finally, they thought, Zaria could ride her bicycle freely. X'antony Jr. could enroll in a high-performing school district.



Where X'antony Brookens and his family used to live in the Milwaukee suburb of Whitefish Bay, which is 90 percent white. Early on, he was routinely stopped by the police, Mr. Brookens said. Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

Over the years, the Brookenses genuinely enjoyed their time in Whitefish Bay. Ms. Spence-Brookens, 39, worked as a college administrator and Mr. Brookens as a job counselor for food stamp recipients, and they sometimes would make it a point to get home early from work so they could spend time in the community. But it was hard to shake that feeling of otherness — especially for X'antony Sr.

About a week after the family moved there, a police officer pulled him over as he rolled up in his red 1994 Mercedes-Benz to the family's modest clapboard.

He was pulled over, the officer said, because of the plastic cover over his license plate. Back in his old neighborhood, Mr. Brookens said, people often stole license plates, so the cover was for security. Here it was illegal, the officer told him. He let Mr. Brookens off with a warning, but not before asking if he lived around there.

"Yeah, this is my house right here," Mr. Brookens told him.

The stops were a routine occurrence early on — about once a week for a month and a half, Mr. Brookens said. He called it getting registered.

“They’re going to keep doing that until they become comfortable with who you are and why you’re here,” said Mr. Brookens, more resigned than angry.

He had more disgust, however, when he took Zaria around the block on her bicycle and a mother rushed her white children inside as they approached.

Mr. Brookens and his wife also worried about Zaria’s sense of self. She always wanted to straighten her hair. She once bawled when her hair got wet in the bathtub and became frizzy. Zaria’s school friends called her their black friend. Her musical tastes gravitated toward Justin Bieber and Taylor Swift.

“I thought she was getting lost,” Mr. Brookens said.

That was not necessarily in the front of the Brookenses’ minds when, two years ago, a friend asked them to rent her cream-colored brick home in Milwaukee. It was surrounded by quiet bungalows and curved streets. It was bigger than their Whitefish Bay rental, and the rent was $350 cheaper.

They thought of how the savings would allow them to do more of the things they like, such as travel. Although the house was in a neighborhood with a poverty rate 12 times higher and a median home value about one-third of that in their suburban neighborhood, they saw it as a place they could call home.

So they returned to Milwaukee, to a different black neighborhood, joining the cluster of families like their own on the city’s north side.

Some of the old challenges re-emerged.

About a month after moving there in 2014, Mr. Brookens forgot to lock his car door, and his charger and computer hard drive were stolen.

Still, like many black families who have made similar choices, they say they feel more comfortable. Zaria, who recently turned 9, relishes seeing more children at school who look like her, and has come to embrace her blackness, going so far as to get dreadlocks. X’antony Jr. has spent the summer working for an activist organization.

The Brookenses now interact more frequently with their neighbors. They host cookouts regularly in their backyard, and they have decorated their shelves with plaques reminding them: “Hope is believing” and “Faith is endless.”

Faith in the Neighborhood

Hope and faith, and determination, drive the Sabirs, too.

That's what brought JoAnne Sabir's ancestors up here from Tennessee and Arkansas. It's why Mr. Sabir, a fourth-degree black belt in karate, is constantly pushing to help the young men he sees roaming the streets — "You got that résumé?" he asks — and it's why the family is staking its business interests just a block from their apartment.

They bet on the neighborhood by opening the Juice Kitchen in October. They both work there, often rising before 6 a.m., because they want to be a beacon of black success and help prevent drugs, alcohol and poverty from consuming the community.

Last Tuesday morning, after a weekend of destructive protests, Ms. Sabir posted a message on the cafe's Facebook page, encouraging a collective black uplift.

"Strategically placed on North 17th Street," she wrote. "Strategically available to love and nurture."

Maanaan Sabir served juice at his Juice Kitchen in Milwaukee. His family's resolve to stay in their neighborhood was only strengthened after a police shooting that led to fiery unrest.
Ruddy Roye for The New York Times

A few hours later, she herded her children into her black sport-utility vehicle and slowly rolled past the remnants of the two nights of clashes between protesters and the police. Past the BP gas station, melted into an ashy heap. “It’s horrible,” Taj said. Past the people barbecuing on a grassy knoll. “That’s the young man’s brother over there that was killed,” Ms. Sabir said. Past a boarded-up bank. “They broke in this bank and then set it on fire,” she said.

“My initial thought,” Ms. Sabir told her children, “was that on this evening, all these young people were so powerful.” But imagine, she added, if they could channel that anger in a positive direction, “if we took that power and that energy and put it toward our greater good.”

Everyone in the car fell silent.

Focusing on the bigger picture can be difficult.

The following evening, on Wednesday night, as Mr. Sabir reclined on his front stoop, he shook his head as car after car whizzed through red lights at the corner. He mentioned a man from the neighborhood who was left in a vegetative state when an S.U.V. plowed into his car a few weeks earlier. “It aches,” Mr. Sabir said.

He rolled his eyes when a car pulled up to a house across the street at about 10:30 p.m. and started honking loudly. “Every night,” Mr. Sabir said.

And he just looked away when a man strolling in front of his house ditched a knife behind a parked car, only to be confronted by two police officers, with Tasers drawn, who arrested him. “Mass incarceration,” Mr. Sabir said.

But just as it seemed that the burdens of living here were converging, Mr. Sabir’s phone buzzed with a reminder of why it was all worth it. The alderman representing the area where most of the past week’s vandalism had occurred wrote that his battered neighborhood could really use a Juice Kitchen.

“Help us,” the alderman wrote, “be the Phoenix that rises from the ashes.”

Follow John Eligon @jeligon on Twitter.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 21, 2016, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: Segregation, the Neighbor That Won’t Leave