

# ESCAPE FROM LOS ANGELES

## White Flight from Los Angeles and Its Schools, 1960-1980

JACK SCHNEIDER  
*Stanford University*

In 1960, Los Angeles was still a decidedly white city. By 1980, it no longer was. What happened in Los Angeles was not uncommon elsewhere, as white residents fled city centers in the latter half of the twentieth century to pursue visions of the suburban good life. Whites abandoned central cities, and as a consequence, the school systems of those urban areas began to reflect their populations—struggling, under-resourced, and non-white. But in Los Angeles, this phenomenon seems to have happened in reverse. Whites with school-age children fled the public school system at even greater rates than those at which they left the city, and at much greater rates than other white residents. Driving families out of Los Angeles public schools was the specter of school desegregation, which threatened to bring populations associated with violence and low academic performance into neighborhood schools. The threat desegregation posed to public schools caused parents to choose private schools, if they could, and reevaluate the quality of life in Los Angeles, if needed. Their subsequent out-migration brought about the schools they feared and forever changed the face of the city they left.

*Keywords:* desegregation; white flight; Los Angeles; schools; education

In 1960, Los Angeles was still a decidedly white city. By 1980, it no longer was. What happened in Los Angeles was not uncommon elsewhere, as white residents fled city centers in the latter half of the twentieth century to pursue visions of the suburban good life. Whites abandoned central cities, and as a consequence, the school systems of those urban areas began to reflect their populations—struggling, under-resourced, and non-white. Yet, in Los Angeles, this phenomenon seems to have happened in reverse. Whites, generally, were not leaving Los Angeles, at least not at first. But those with school-age children were, even while the city remained majority-white and largely segregated, and they left the public school system at even greater rates than those at which they left the city. Like the city itself, Los Angeles's schools had long been highly segregated, but the threat of desegregation—credible in the aftermath of the Brown decisions and terrifying after the Watts riots—weighed heavy with white parents. Threats to the schools caused parents to reevaluate the quality

of life in Los Angeles, and their subsequent flight brought about the schools they feared and forever changed the face of the city they left.

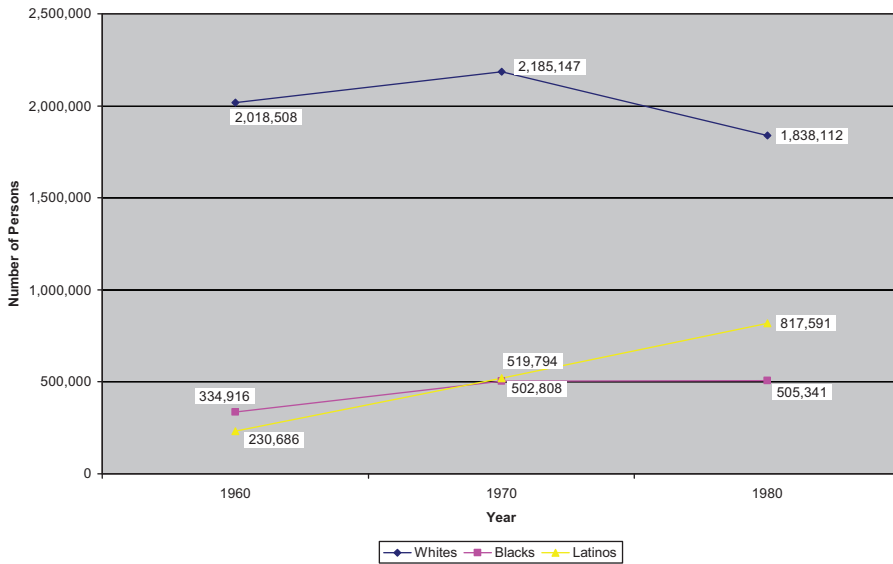
The traditional story of white flight centers around post-WWII federal housing and highway programs, deteriorating urban housing stocks, the application of mass manufacturing techniques to home construction, and the in-migration of populations of color to urban areas. These factors collectively made suburbanization attractive to and possible for white middle-class families, who consequently left cities and urban public schools. Los Angeles is a noteworthy case for exploring this narrative because so much about Los Angeles seems different, despite a similar end result. Explosive postwar growth in an already sprawling city whose public transportation system had been largely dismantled made the automobile the preferred mode of transportation earlier in Los Angeles than in other cities and made for a particularly mobile and less centralized population. This, coupled with a relatively young housing stock and the existence of de facto segregation, makes Los Angeles difficult to square with the traditional white flight story.

An alternative narrative on out-migration of whites from central cities, both in California and nationally, proposes that white flight took place in large part because of fears among relatively conservative members of the working and middle class about the security of their most important investment—their property.<sup>1</sup> Historian Tom Sugrue, for example, argues that residents of Detroit viewed integration as a threat to their home values as well as their personal values and responded politically to defend their neighborhoods via further segregation. When it became apparent that the tide could not be kept back, they left their quasi-suburban homes in the city for further-out suburbs.<sup>2</sup>

Working- and middle-class whites in Los Angeles were also highly protective of their property. Upon judicial repeal of restrictive housing covenants, upwardly mobile blacks began to move out of segregated neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> Many whites perceived this expansion as a threat to the character of their neighborhoods, and thus “a threat to their opportunities as working Americans.”<sup>4</sup> In response, whites used real estate associations, banks, and community organizations to keep people of color out of their neighborhoods. In doing so, they framed their actions as part of a larger effort to maintain a particular vision later associated with suburbia: family authority, traditional middle-class white values, and a respect for individual freedom and private property.<sup>5</sup>

But Los Angeles is also a distinct case. Between 1960 and 1970, Los Angeles remained highly segregated,<sup>6</sup> and the overall white population remained relatively stable.<sup>7</sup>

Although the white population would experience a significant overall decline by 1980, certain whites had been rapidly leaving the city for two decades. Families with school-age children were rapidly disappearing from Los Angeles between 1960 and 1980.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, they were fleeing the public schools at even greater rates than those at which they were leaving the city. Though other cross-sections of the white population would begin

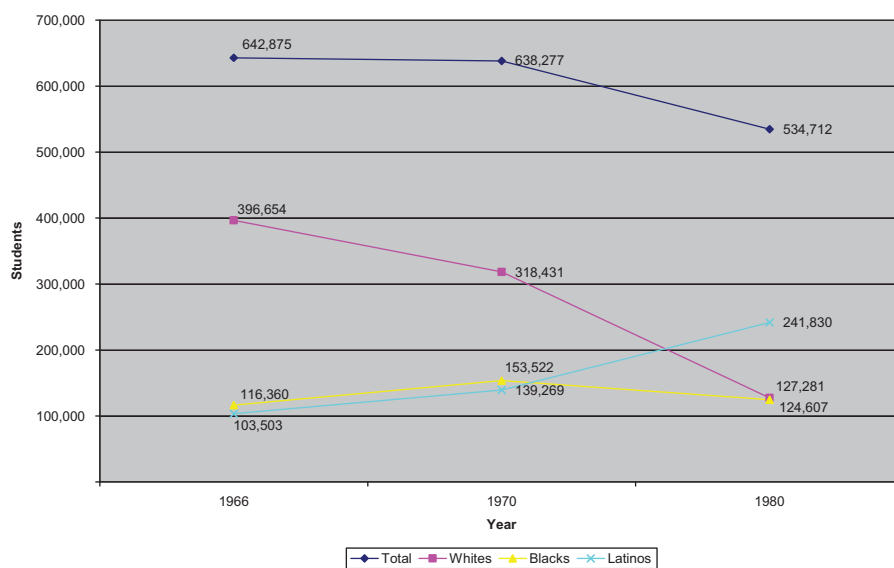


**Table 1: Total Population by Race, Los Angeles, 1960-1980**

SOURCE: US Census.

following their lead, whites with children five to nineteen years of age seem to have been a particularly sensitive group, especially when it came to schools. They left or never came to Los Angeles for a number of reasons, no doubt, but the fact that they left the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)<sup>9</sup> at significantly greater rates than those at which they left the city indicates that perceptions of schools were a driving force in white flight from Los Angeles.

In 1966, 396,654 whites were enrolled in LAUSD schools;<sup>10</sup> by 1980, only 127,281 would be enrolled. It was precisely during this period that Los Angeles public schools were engaged in a very public struggle over school desegregation. Although Los Angeles schools would remain highly segregated until the 1980s, the desegregation struggle began two decades earlier and stirred up enough fear and resentment among working- and middle-class whites that many enrolled their children in private schools or reassessed the value of living in Los Angeles.<sup>11</sup> A critical mass of white families left the district, and in doing so changed the way future parents with school-age children would view Los Angeles public schools. Many who were already considering leaving the city decided to leave. Many who might otherwise have chosen to put down roots in Los Angeles saw a school system in upheaval and joined the throngs of new commuters transforming former orange groves into suburban refuges. Los Angeles became a city for those without children, for those who could afford private schools, and for those who could not afford to leave. In short, it became the city it is today.



**Table 2: K-12 Enrollment by Race LAUSD 1966-1980**

SOURCES: 1. Sam Hamerman et al., Report of the Los Angeles City Schools Planning Team. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Unified School District, 1967, pp. 51, 56. 2. Annual Ethnic Survey, Los Angeles Unified School District.

### THE THREAT OF DESEGREGATION

In 1955, the second *Brown* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court mandated that schools begin the process of desegregation with deliberate speed. Los Angeles, though with far less violence and fanfare than cities like Little Rock, would soon begin to face the question of segregation in its public schools. Los Angeles's system of segregation was a result of neighborhood schools in what were largely segregated neighborhoods—de facto rather than de jure segregation—which would prove quite complicated in addressing, even with the power of court mandates. Tellingly, LAUSD, which began facing segregation lawsuits in the 1960s, would be even more segregated by 1970.

In 1962, the California State Board of Education began to address the issue of desegregation directly. The board asked districts to give "serious and thoughtful consideration" to the problem of racial imbalances in schools, and in October required districts to "exert all effort to avoid and eliminate segregation."<sup>12</sup> These directives, however, particularly given their vague nature, were met mostly with inaction. Consequently, California schools at this time, particularly in Los Angeles, were more segregated than those in Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, Virginia, and South Carolina.<sup>13</sup> Legislative inaction in the face of these high levels of segregation did not mean that the issue would be ignored.

In September of 1962, parents of color working in conjunction with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sent a message about school segregation by sending their children to enroll in white schools. In the community of Baldwin Hills, for example, black and Japanese parents went to enroll their children in all-white Baldwin Hills Elementary, though the school subsequently, as anticipated, refused them.<sup>14</sup>

A year later, in 1963, the family of Jay Jackson, a black student in Pasadena, a neighboring city to Los Angeles, brought suit against the Pasadena school district—a case extensively covered by the Los Angeles Times and the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner. The court, in its ruling, sided with Jackson, and “in the process applied *Brown v. Board of Education* to California for the first time.”<sup>15</sup> The court held that “residential segregation is itself an evil,” and that school boards must do more than just “refrain from affirmative discriminatory conduct.” School boards, the court argued, must “take steps, insofar as reasonably feasible, to alleviate racial imbalance in schools regardless of its cause.”<sup>16</sup> Residential segregation, the court found, was not an excuse for segregated schools—a potentially disastrous finding for families that had managed to maintain segregated communities, but whose children nevertheless might be faced with integrated schools.

That same year, the Los Angeles Board of Education endorsed integration and announced it as a goal, taking steps to publicize these pronouncements. The May 30, 1963 headline of the Los Angeles Times read: “L.A. Declared Target for Total Integration.” Also in 1963, the newly formed United Civil Rights Council—a coalition of seventy-six city organizations—made its first major push to pressure the city to desegregate schools. They promised to continue their push and in doing so, threatened to use every legal non-violent means to achieve the goal of total integration.<sup>17</sup>

In August of 1963, *Crawford v. Board of Education of the City of Los Angeles* was filed. The case concerned Jordan High in Watts and nearby South Gate High. One mile apart, the schools were 99 percent black and 97 percent white, respectively. In the suit, the plaintiffs sought to halt the expenditure of public funds to renovate Jordan High until the board desegregated the school, which effectively meant redrawing the school boundary between Watts and South Gate.<sup>18</sup> Though Judge Alfred Gitelson did not rule on the case for seven years, when he did, he found LAUSD substantially segregated. The Board of Education “had issued no orders to integrate . . . [and] it had never so much as given staff a definition of integration.”<sup>19</sup> Gitelson ordered LAUSD, with its nearly 700,000 students, to begin an integration program that would eliminate majority minority schools.<sup>20</sup>

Gitelson, for his decision, received death threats and was not re-elected—clear signs that the public, at least the public that voted, was listening. As for desegregation, despite Gitelson’s finding, schools did not desegregate. The Crawford case would take two decades to finally settle, weaving along the way a complex legal history that would include a number of reversals in

state and federal courts and very little progress in actually desegregating Los Angeles's public schools.<sup>21</sup>

School desegregation received much more attention than its limited implementation may have warranted. Nevertheless, the attention drawn to it impacted citizens, many of whom "took these high-sounding statements at face value" and began to act accordingly.<sup>22</sup> Looming on the horizon was the threat that schools would be integrated either by re-zoning or by busing—a major threat to the character of white neighborhoods even as those neighborhoods retained their racial composition. School desegregation would become even more threatening with the increasing political cooperation among blacks, their liberal white allies, and a somewhat less-visible number of Latinos. The Watts riot was also just around the corner.

### PERCEPTIONS OF BLACKS AND LATINOS (BEFORE WATTS)

Desegregation would likely have been a less significant threat had populations of color been perceived in generally positive terms. This, however, was a major obstacle for a white population that was generally segregated from populations of color, most importantly in residence. Further, populations of color both in and out of schools were politically marginalized and negatively portrayed in the news media, no doubt affecting white perceptions of them and furthering racial stereotypes of blacks and Latinos as unmotivated at best and violent at worst.

Students of color were widely perceived, even by their teachers, as truant and low-achieving. A 1963 study by David Gottlieb measuring the views of black and white inner city teachers found that more than 50 percent of white teachers found black students to be "lazy" and "talkative," and over 30 percent found them "rebellious" and "moody." Fewer than 20 percent of black teachers, by contrast, agreed with these statements. Over 60 percent of black teachers found their black students "cooperative," "fun loving," and "happy."<sup>23</sup>

Although the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights pointed out that "the root of the problem is continued academic disadvantage," it would have been quite difficult for whites on the outside to see the disaffection of students of color as a byproduct of socioeconomic and educational inequalities.<sup>24</sup> For many adolescents of color, dropping out of school was the only way to avoid "psychological and cultural demoralization." By World War II, most students of color had come to accept the futility of seeking an education in the hostile and indifferent environment of the Los Angeles educational system.<sup>25</sup> Students of color attended the worst schools in LAUSD; this, in conjunction with the fact that due to the high level of segregation there was little contact between whites and students of color, made it easier to see students of color as a problem waiting to spread.

More destructive than perceptions of students of color as low-achieving, however, were perceptions of them as violent. In July of 1963, before the uprising in Watts and before moves to address de facto segregation, the Los Angeles Times referenced Angelinos “who fear violence growing out of integration”<sup>26</sup> gathering in an emergency meeting at Beverly Hills High School. The Los Angeles Times reported that a leader from the NAACP reassured an overflow audience of 1,500 people that “Beverly Hills is not a target city—at least, not right now.” But, he added, “We feel that the city of Beverly Hills has the responsibility of facing up to the drive for integration.”<sup>27</sup> That same year, the anti-integrationist South Gate Education Committee gathered 17,500 signatures in two weeks for a petition that stated the group’s opposition to integration, threatening legal action if South Gate children were forced to attend school with black students. A few weeks later, the group pressed unsuccessfully for secession from LAUSD.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, there was the threat posed by the emerging coalition of liberal whites and activist minorities, particularly blacks. In 1963, three black city council members won election. That same year, a liberal coalition at the state level passed the Rumford Fair Housing Act, directly threatening property values with integration. The next year, Proposition 14 to repeal the act went on the California ballot and was passed by two-thirds of voters. Educated, liberal Democratic whites by and large voted no, but other white districts, whether Republican or Democratic, voted for the measure in the range of 65-75 percent. The public alliance between liberal whites and minorities stoked conservative fears of further measures that would tax the family homestead to extinction “in order to finance the integration of public education and other social programs obnoxious to white suburbanites.”<sup>29</sup>

## AFTER WATTS

For six days in August of 1965, the Watts riot consumed Los Angeles, and would forever change the context of integration in the city. A total of thirty-four people were officially reported killed during the riot, 1,100 were injured, 4,000 were arrested, and an estimated \$35 million in damage was done. Watts, and by extension Los Angeles, joined New York and Philadelphia, which had experienced race riots in 1964, as an urban crisis zone. Coverage of the Watts riot brought the concept of violent race-conflict into public discourse. Post-riot news coverage included “considerably more attention to interracial violence . . . mainly due to discussions of the riot . . . [and] unfavorable [media] references rose from 15% before the riot to 34% afterward.”<sup>30</sup>

A 1971 study by Johnson, Sears, and McConahay, led the authors to conclude that race conflict in Los Angeles in the late 1960s, though it was presented as a present and significant threat, “served as the justification for further inattention and inaction, and for added repression.”<sup>31</sup> It worked. In her

study of Watts-adjacent South Gate, Becky Nicolaidis quotes South Gate resident Roger Lockwood on the potential result of the riots if schools had been desegregated: "What . . . would have been the outcome if these people had won out? . . . Needless to say white students coerced into such a hostile outburst of hate and discrimination would have been beaten, raped and killed. It cannot now be denied."<sup>32</sup>

Chad McClellan, chairman of a seventeen-member committee of businessmen appointed by the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce to help meet the crisis faced by the city after Watts, perhaps put it best when he wrote an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times*: "Will there be another riot here this summer? No one knows. It could happen."<sup>33</sup> McClellan also connected the riots with the school system, writing that "every element in our society must contribute toward improvement . . . [including] all levels of government, the church, labor, our schools and colleges, and especially Negroes themselves. Their deficiencies in education and attitude especially need correcting."<sup>34</sup>

Roy Wilkins, Executive Secretary of the NAACP was much blunter, only months after the riot, telling the *Los Angeles Times* that he "would be for tearing up the school districts and would demonstrate every day . . . the only thing some people understand," he added, "is public disturbances."<sup>35</sup> In urging integration at all schools, Wilkins also told the paper that he favored "transporting Negro children to all-white schools if this is the only way they can get better schooling."<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, headlines in the *Los Angeles Times* continued to raise alarms about racial violence. "Threats of Race Riot Likely to Continue" headlined a story in August of 1965; on March 22, 1967, subscribers to the *Times* woke to "Schools Warned to Prepare for Racial Strife" gracing the front page. "It sounds terrible," an administrator noted in one of the stories, "but a school must have a riot policy."<sup>37</sup>

East of Watts, Latinos were also struggling for better schooling conditions, and like blacks, they would be understood in a new post-Watts context. In March of 1968, Latinos staged a series of school walkouts and protests over the period of a few weeks that collectively became known as the East Los Angeles student strikes. Eventually, the strikes resulted in a special Los Angeles School Board meeting "to consider issues raised by the walkouts."<sup>38</sup> G. P. Rosen, in his 1975 study of the political ideology of Latino activists, argued that "the East Los Angeles student strike was of central importance because . . . it brought into prominence direct confrontation as a political tactic."<sup>39</sup>

The East Los Angeles student strike received enough publicity to catapult the Brown Berets—a small group perceived as militant and representative—to relative prominence. The Berets received "extensive and disproportionate coverage devoted to them in the mass media,"<sup>40</sup> and by the late 1960s, Chicano youth were dominating public discussion with militant rhetoric.<sup>41</sup> This strategy, however, though it succeeded in gaining attention and some degree of political influence, also propagated the image of Latino students as angry, disengaged, and uncontrollable.



In a 1966 study, researchers Marascuilo and Penfield examined the ways that Berkeley, California was responding to school desegregation. Northern communities, they noted, were characterized by *de facto* rather than *de jure* segregation, and they set out to explore the extent to which the public was aware of this. They found that while many respondents indicated that they would support correcting racial imbalances generally, they were not in favor of correcting those imbalances within their children's classes. In their research, they analyzed surveys intended to measure Californians' openness to integration and found that opposition "was expressed primarily by white residents, homeowners, registered voters, persons educated in the community's schools, and by those who have resided in the community for over six years."<sup>42</sup>

Many whites favored the concept of integration, yet still had difficulty distinguishing between reality and stereotypes when it came to the possibility of black or Latino students attending previously white schools. Students and teachers alike suffered from the assumption, for instance, that all black students were from Watts and capable of violence. In a letter to the editor of the conservative *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet*, former teacher Ann C. Hamilton wrote that many teachers "simply do not have the physical strength to cope with 25 or 50 ghetto kids. And unless you've had experience of this kind, don't say that it doesn't take an iron constitution to survive it . . . some of my former pupils were already felons, and one had even committed murder."<sup>43</sup>

Marilyn Elias wrote in the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* of one teacher's experience with assumptions about race among students: "After a lot of discussion, one girl said to a black classmate, 'Joy, I like you very much, but I can't go to Watts to see you.' And the other girl said, 'What makes you think I live in Watts?' The kid's parents actually were both professional people, she came from a home much like the white girl." The children, according to Elias, "were making assumptions about one another, and they were acting on these assumptions, not reality."<sup>44</sup>

### **THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD**

While the Crawford case would not be settled until the 1980s, re-zoning and busing became a threat as early as the 1960s, given the activities of integration advocates in the courts, in city hall, and in the schools. An article in the *Pico Post* in February of 1968 quoted Superintendent Jack Crowther beseeching citizens to maintain calm about desegregation and potential busing: "We cannot allow these false rumors to continue, for their only effect is to create a feeling of panic and dissension. I plead to all responsible citizens and especially to the communications media that they do everything possible to combat these rumors."<sup>45</sup>

A few months thereafter, the Los Angeles City Board of Education passed a motion in favor of small-scale busing. Before the vote was taken, Dr. Ralph

Richardson, a member of the Board, attempted to clarify which groups were taking which stand on the busing issue. According to the report in the *Van Nuys News and Green Sheet*, Richardson concluded that “most of the objection to the busing program was raised by people who dislike the thought of having a Negro child in the same school room with their own children.”<sup>46</sup>

Many also feared that the cost of bringing “youngsters from East and Central Los Angeles”<sup>47</sup>—code for Latino and black students—into schools “would have to come out of the budget by eliminating other items . . . as there [was] no new money available for the purpose.” One of the justifications for the program was as an effort to relieve overcrowding, but if students from overcrowded schools were moved to better-off schools, some assumed it might diminish educational quality in receiving schools by increasing the student-teacher ratio.<sup>48</sup>

Reactions were mixed, but those who opposed changes in the neighborhood school system began immediately to discuss private schools and relocation. John Austin, a correspondent for *New Revue*, declared: “Myself and others will never be legislated or in any other way intimidated as to where and how we send out children to school. This is as long as I can afford to pay for private schools.”<sup>49</sup> Another piece in the *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet* reported that “Speaking for angry residents who ‘would rather move out of the area’ than submit to the proposed busing program of the Board of Education, former chamber president James Moore voiced the demand of protesters for an optional arrangement” regarding integration. Citing “publicly known violence” and “attacks on girls” allegedly committed by students of color at San Fernando High, Moore “heatedly stated that the imminent busing program for the area to accomplish ‘ethnic balance’ was philosophically unsound, unfair to taxpayers and unworkable.” He also maintained that “the local area [was] being depleted, homes [were] being sold and business [was] suffering because of the attitude of the School Board.”<sup>50</sup>

## WHITE FLIGHT

In the Board of Education’s defense presentation in the first Crawford trial, “‘white flight’ had been assiduously built up as an inevitable consequence of integration.”<sup>51</sup> But flight was already taking place before the Crawford trial was first decided in 1970. Despite the fact that schools were still highly segregated, LAUSD schools were already experiencing a dramatic decrease in white enrollment as fearful parents enrolled their children in private schools or pulled up stakes and headed for the suburbs. Between 1966 and 1970, Los Angeles Unified lost nearly 80,000 white students, while experiencing overall increases in black and Latino enrollment.

As the white population of LAUSD schools collapsed, its effects were felt in the overall white population of Los Angeles. Even though whites generally

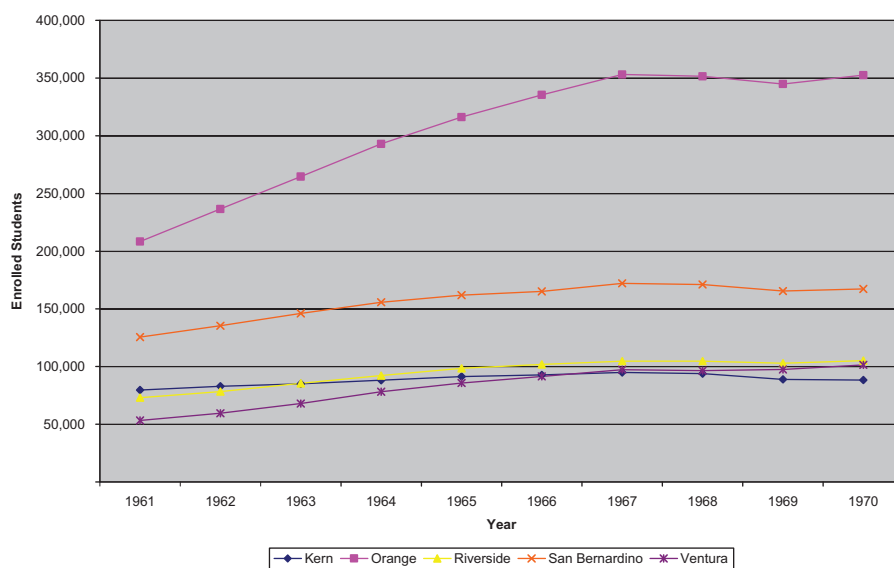
were not fleeing Los Angeles, the white share of the total population in Los Angeles decreased from 78 percent to 54 percent between 1960 and 1980 as white families with school-age children left the city. The number of black Angelinos was steadily increasing, and the number of Latinos was virtually skyrocketing. Whites in Los Angeles, with a national birthrate under or barely reaching that of replacement, and having lost the highest birthrate section of their population, could not compete demographically. The white population inched up from 2,018,508 in 1960 to 2,185,147 in 1970, only to decline significantly to 1,838,112 in 1980. Even the relatively large 9 percent decline in the overall white population between 1960 and 1980, however, was far less dramatic than the overall decline of school age whites—30 percent—or even more dramatically, whites enrolled in LAUSD for that period (68 percent).

Where were all of the whites leaving LAUSD going? While it is difficult to tell exactly where individual families moved, the population increases in surrounding suburbs are telling. Many whites no doubt stayed within the county and moved to other cities outside of Los Angeles proper. But the huge increase in population in surrounding counties tells a distinct story. The population of Orange County, for instance, boomed in the 1960s when “panic or prejudice moved large numbers of longtime residents” there from Los Angeles,<sup>52</sup> further solidifying the county’s identity as a haven for whites concerned about states-rights, property-rights, and “traditional” values.<sup>53</sup>

Orange County’s population more than doubled from 703,925 in 1960 to 1,420,386 in 1970, when it was 88 percent white, and again increased dramatically to 1,932,709 in 1980. Los Angeles’s other neighboring counties—Ventura, Kern, Riverside, and San Bernardino—grew collectively in population nearly 100 percent (from 1,300,904 to 2,550,445) between 1960 and 1980.

Some nearby counties did experience a decline in population, given the transition of the baby boom generation into adulthood, but none of these counties experienced Los Angeles’s 7 percent drop-off in school-age children between 1960 and 1970. Children under eighteen years of age as a share of the total population fell in all counties except Ventura (which increased its under-eighteen share from 37.1 percent to 39.5 percent), but none decreased by more than 3 percent, less than half of Los Angeles County’s figure. These numbers, while perhaps not immediately striking, are not disaggregated by race, meaning that Los Angeles’ growing population of high-birthrate Latinos inflates the city’s under-eighteen share, while the growing populations of low-birthrate whites in the surrounding counties equally deflate their under-eighteen share.

Some whites, rather than moving, sent their children to private schools. According to a 1977 New York Times article, suburban real estate brokers reported that home-buyers leaving Los Angeles wanted to avoid court-ordered busing. It also reported that the threat of busing was also driving up applications at Los Angeles private schools. Although some city officials admitted that busing could accelerate the middle-class flight, they also made the point that white flight was “already a fact of life” by that time.<sup>54</sup>



**Table 3: K-14 Enrollment (K-12 1970) for Surrounding Counties, 1961-1970**  
SOURCE: U.S. Census.

According to private school administrators, the shift to private schools occurred because “of such widely publicized problems in the public schools as vandalism, gang violence and declining achievement level.”<sup>55</sup> Publicity of these problems, now common complaints about urban schools, may have outweighed the problems themselves at the time. Regardless, more and more middle- and upper-class families pulled their children out of LAUSD schools. By 1980, the ranks of Los Angeles County private schools had swelled to roughly 200,000.

Many whites, of course, stayed. Some sought out magnet schools once they became available in the late 1970s, designed to draw a diverse mix of students with the promise of enhanced academic offerings. Others perhaps lacked information about where to go or were constrained by a lack of mobility or lack of resources. Some, certainly, held enlightened views about schooling and were determined not to abandon the public system. Nevertheless, the impact of the families that left or never came to LAUSD schools was dramatic.

Los Angeles remained a very attractive place to live for those who desired the suburban ideal and could afford segregated neighborhoods and private schools. These white Angelinos had nothing to fear given the resources available to them. The most vulnerable seem to have been working- and lower-middle-class whites, unable to compete with other whites for exclusive neighborhoods or exclusive schools, the price of which responded to the market. Though most whites still lived in segregated neighborhoods, they

were being condensed as Los Angeles's population of color grew: in 1960, white neighborhoods comprised 71.8 percent of neighborhood clusters identified by the Census Bureau, and in 1980 they made up only 44.2 percent of total neighborhoods.

Many whites, facing the threat of losing their shot at social mobility in a school system presented as being under siege, left LAUSD, and as a consequence the city or county as well. Like white working- and middle-class homeowners in other cities, whites in the Los Angeles area had an alternative waiting for them just outside the city, where homes were each day replacing fruit trees.

### A CITY TRANSFORMED

In 1978, LAUSD unveiled its desegregation plan, two years after the California Supreme Court had ordered the district to desegregate. The plan called for the mandatory reassignment of 54,000 students. Although white resistance kicked into high gear with the organization of protest movements like Bustop and United Parents Against Forced Busing, the damage was already done. White families sensitive to the shifting political climate and sensationalistic news coverage had preemptively enrolled their children in private schools, or recalculating the value of living in Los Angeles and left.

Desegregation reform threatened the suburban ideal for conservative working- and middle-class whites with school-age children before further changes in the city drove out others, and even before desegregation became a reality. For those who left earlier rather than later, the motive seems clear: desegregation was coming, it was going to be a problem, and it was not worth the risk to stick around and see how it would go. Further, given the growing coalition of liberal whites and people of color and the allure of the suburban good life, escaping Los Angeles looked better than ever. In 1973, when Tom Bradley was elected Los Angeles's first black mayor, white refugees just beyond the city line were trying to reestablish "the suburban Eden of the early 1950s, with low taxes and 'neighborhood' (read: white) schools."<sup>56</sup> Not surprisingly, a survey of Santa Clarita (Los Angeles County) residents revealed that relocating families cited "escaping the L.A. school system" as a primary reason for leaving the city.<sup>57</sup>

As with those who left many other city centers, the first to leave Los Angeles were concerned with the protection of their property values and their moral values. In Los Angeles, the threat to these came through the school system. Those who feared desegregation in many cases were able to maintain the whiteness of their neighborhoods, but their schools—a major part of how parents of school-age children evaluate neighborhoods—were perceived to be under attack.

Most of the families that left LAUSD schools were not trying to start a movement, nor were they acting out of a hateful ideology. They were trying

to protect their families for whom they felt the good life in Los Angeles was at stake. But, as they left, they transformed the city they left behind as much as the communities they entered. The at least 80,000 white students who left LAUSD schools between 1966 and 1970 tipped the district's demographic makeup dramatically. By the time the first of the Crawford decisions was handed down in 1970, the district was no longer majority white. This in itself was neither good nor bad, but no doubt significantly changed the context in which other whites—those who remained, many of whom would not remain for long—understood their city and its schools. Many of those who could leave *did*, and in so doing set a precedent that many others would follow.

LAUSD schools are now overwhelmingly majority minority and plagued by many of the difficulties that often afflict school systems predominantly serving populations of color. Beyond problems in the school system, this has changed the way many parents or future parents, regardless of race or class background, view living in Los Angeles. "I'm trying to be as objective as possible here," wrote a Los Angeles resident to a mother moving to the city from Indiana, "but I personally would not live in the city of Los Angeles as a single mom with a child unless I had some fantastic, high-paying job. No problem as a single person—it would be an adventure, but having a child in most Los Angeles public schools is not something I would do."<sup>58</sup>

Advocates of school reform have long argued that the populations of cities play a significant role in what can be accomplished in city schools. You need to work, they contend, with what you have. In the case of Los Angeles, the opposite was also true: The school reform sought on behalf of students of color played a significant role in shaping the population of the city. Urban became synonymous with poor public education, and that perception, when acted upon, became a reality.

## References

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## NOTES

1. For a more in-depth look at white flight in California, see Albert M. Camarillo, "Cities of Color: The Making of California's Minority-Majority Cities," *Pacific Historical Review*, 76(1) (February 2007); Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Josh Sides, *L.A. City Limits* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

2. Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

3. Court cases *Shelley v. Kraemer* in 1948 and *Barrows v. Jackson* in 1953. For more on this shift in Los Angeles, see Sides, *L.A. City Limits*.



4. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 96.
5. See Nicolaidēs's *My Blue Heaven*, as well as Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).
6. According to data from the U.S. Census, the average racial composition of majority white neighborhoods in 1960 was 91.6 percent white. By 1970, that would fall only slightly to 87.3 percent.
7. In 1960, the city had 2,018,508 white residents (78 percent of the total population) versus 334,916 black residents and 230,916 Latino residents. While the number of whites living in the city in 1970 would increase marginally to 2,185,147, the growth of blacks and Latinos would far outpace that of whites. By 1980, the number of whites in the city would decrease to 1,838,112, just over 50 percent of the population. For more, see Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), chaps. 2, 3.
8. In 1960, 486,224 white children five to nineteen years of age resided in the city—75 percent of the total school age population. By 1970, the number of white children ages five to nineteen in the city fell to 395,534 (55 percent of the total) and by 1980, fell again to 339,627 (48 percent).
9. The Los Angeles School District, formed in 1853, became a charter city school district with the incorporation of the City of Los Angeles in 1870. Over the years, the district annexed a number of other districts, which expanded it past the borders of the city. Los Angeles Unified School District was formed in 1961, and includes most of the city as well as portions of twenty-five other municipalities. Consequently, readers should keep in mind that the school-age population of Los Angeles will be smaller and not identical to the school-age population of LAUSD.
10. More whites may have been enrolled in 1960, but data is not available prior to 1966.
11. For more on school desegregation as a driving force in white flight, see James Coleman, "Recent Trends in School Integration," *Educational Researcher* 4(7) (1975) and Reynolds Farley, "Is Coleman Right?" *Social Policy* 6(4) (1976).
12. Charles Wollenberg. *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 143.
13. Congressional Record, 92<sup>nd</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1972, vol. 118, pt. I: 564-66.
14. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 161.
15. Wollenberg, *All Deliberate Speed*, 142.
16. Jay R. Jackson Jr. v. Pasadena City School District et al., 59 CA Reports 876-82 (1963).
17. Nicolaidēs, *My Blue Heaven*, 287.
18. Nicolaidēs, 291.
19. John Caughey and LaRee Caughey, *To Kill a Child's Spirit: The Tragedy of School Segregation in Los Angeles* (Itasca: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1973), 137.
20. The term majority minority is used to denote the majority presence of a minority population.
21. After Gitelson was voted out of office, the California Court of Appeal reversed Gitelson's ruling. However, in 1976, the California Supreme Court reversed the Court of Appeal and upheld Gitelson. In 1977, Judge Paul Egly took over responsibility for overseeing the School Board's proposed integration plan, which was finalized in 1978. The plan was frozen by the Court of Appeals, but shortly thereafter ordered into effect by the California Supreme Court. Two years later, Proposition 1 outlawing "mandatory busing" for de facto segregation passed with 70 percent of the vote in California. It would later be upheld in the California Supreme Court and the U.S. Supreme Court in 1982.
22. Caughey and Caughey, *To Kill a Child's Spirit*, 137.
23. David Gottlieb, "Teaching and Students: The Views of Black and White Teachers," *Sociology of Education* 37 (1964): 345-53.
24. U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. *Racial Isolation in Public Schools, I and II*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1967, 162.
25. Norman Klein and Martin Schiesl, eds., *20<sup>th</sup> Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict* (Claremont: Regina Books, 1990).
26. "Integration Rally Draws 1,500 at Beverly Hills," *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 1963, 5.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Nicolaidēs, *My Blue Heaven*, 295. See also stories from *South Gate Press*, September 1963.
29. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 183.
30. Paula B. Johnson, David O. Sears, and John B. McConahay. "Black Invisibility, the Press and the Los Angeles Riot," *American Journal of Sociology* 76: 698-721, 714.
31. Johnson, Sears, and McConahay, "Black Invisibility," 719.
32. Nicolaidēs, *My Blue Heaven*, 325.

33. Chad McClellan, Chad, "A Different View of Watts '67," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 1967: A9.
34. Ibid.
35. Dick Turpin, "Slow School Integration Hit by NAACP Leader," *Los Angeles Times*, December 2, 1965: A8.
36. Ibid.
37. Roy Haynes, "Schools Warned to Prepare for Racial Strife," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1967, 1.
38. Gerald P. Rosen, *Political Ideology and the Chicano Movement: A Study of the Political Ideology of Activists in the Chicano Movement* (San Francisco: R&E Research Associates, 1975): 71.
39. Ibid.
40. Rosen, *Political Ideology and the Chicano Movement*, 77.
41. Klein and Schiesl, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Los Angeles: Power, Promotion, and Social Conflict*.
42. Leonard A. Marascuilo and Kathleen Penfield, "A Northern Urban Community's Attitudes toward Racial Imbalances in Schools and Classrooms," *The School Review* 74(4) (1966): 359-79, 372.
43. Ann C. Hamilton, "Why Many Don't Want to Teach in the Ghetto," *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet*, February 26, 1972.
44. Marilyn Elias, "Academic Factors Supercede [sic] Race," *Santa Monica Evening Outlook*, January 14, 1972.
45. "Supt. Calls School Busing of Thousands False Rumor," *Pico Post*, February 1, 1968.
46. Leslie Claypool, "Small-Scale School Busing Wins 5 to 1 Board Approval," *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet*, May 21, 1968.
47. Alice Freifeld, "Voluntary Busing to Bring Students from City Schools," *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet* (1969): 1A.
48. "900 Students Asking Transfer by Busing," *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet*, June 11, 1968: 17A.
49. Bebe Lyons, "Judge's Mail Runs Against Decision in Integration Case," *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet*, February 19, 1970.
50. Albert Kelley, "Ex-Chamber Chief Leads Valley Protest of Busing," *Van Nuys News and Valley Green Sheet*, May 21, 1971.
51. John Caughey, *The Shame of Los Angeles: Segregated Schools, 1970-1971* (Los Angeles: Quail Books, 1971), 22.
52. Art Seidenbaum, "Could and Should in Inglewood," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1977: C5. Additionally, an untitled and undated newspaper clipping from the papers of Judge Paul Egly, the Los Angeles Superior Court judge charged with overseeing the Board of Education's desegregation plan, states: "When families move to certain areas, they take schools into consideration. Consequently, if forced busing becomes a reality in Orange County, the 'white flight,' which occurred in Los Angeles, is inevitable in Orange County as well." Egly scrawled "Enough Said" in large print on the clipping, authored by Iman Anabtawi.
53. For more, see McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*.
54. Robert Lindsey, "Los Angeles Schools Plan Busing Amid White Flight," *New York Times*, October 11, 1977: 20.
55. David G. Savage, "Private Schools Do Well Despite L.A. Busing End," *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1981: 1.
56. Davis, *City of Quartz*, 185.
57. Ibid.
58. Los Angeles City Forum. <http://www.city-data.com/forum/los-angeles/72913-help-mom-south-fairfax-west-pico.html> (accessed May 8, 2007).

Jack Schneider is a doctoral student in the history of education at Stanford University. His research is in the history of school equity and education reform, and he is currently working on a project on the U.S. citizenship test.