



# What are the long-term impacts of inter-ethnic childhood contact?

Despite progress on many fronts, prejudice based on race and immigrant background continues to be a major societal issue. Social interaction has long been postulated as a potential means of reducing prejudices, and a range of experiments have shown that contact with minorities improves the attitudes of majority group members and reduce discrimination (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Yet questions remain as to whether similar effects are likely in non-experimental settings where contact occurs naturally. Moreover, even such short-term effects do take place, does such contact have impacts on attitudes and behaviour in the long run?

Several recent studies have shed light on these questions by focusing on inter-ethnic contact in an important setting: schools. Schools have the potential to force interaction between people

from different backgrounds for a sustained period at a time when prejudices might be most malleable. Indeed, social mixing is often an explicit desire of education policy, but it is unclear whether contact at this young age will have an impact on people as they grow into adulthood and may lose touch with their childhood friends.

Investigating this question is made difficult because we can't simply infer the answer by analysing whether people who went to more ethnically mixed schools behave differently. Even if we found this to be true, it may stem not from the impact of school contact but instead from less prejudiced parents simultaneously sending their children to more mixed schools and transmitting their attitudes in other ways. To get around this problem, a number of recent papers have exploited pseudo-random variation in ethnic exposure across cohorts

within school. In particular, children generally interact most with students in the same grade and of the same gender, and the ethnic composition of these smaller groups often varies in a way which parents are unlikely to predict when choosing a school.

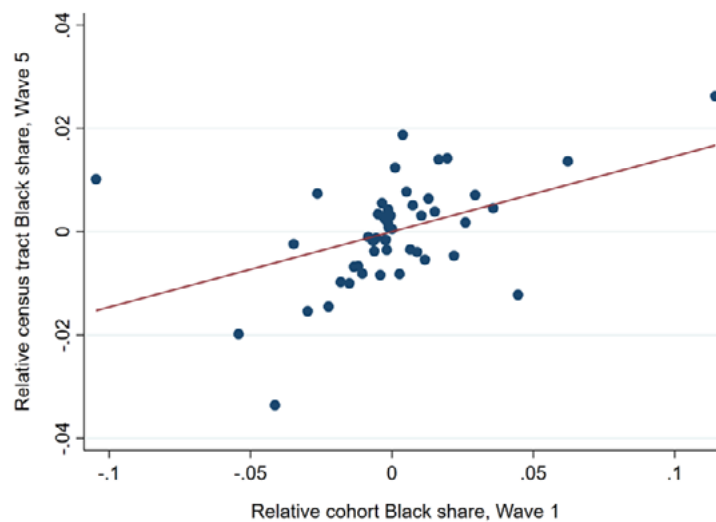
What does studying the impact of such variation reveal? Looking at the US, a pair of papers find evidence for substantial changes in two forms of behaviour many years into adulthood (Merlino et al. 2020; 2023). First, Whites exposed to more Blacks in school are more likely to have a romantic relationship with a Black when they are an adult. Crucially, this impact is driven by exposure to Blacks of the same gender, and hence doesn't come simply from Whites meeting their future partners in school. Instead, evidence suggests that the most likely channel is a change

in attitudes, since the effect doesn't diminish as the White individuals grow older or move further away from school. Second, Whites exposed to more Blacks go on to live in neighbourhoods with more Black residents, an important outcome in a context where residential racial segregation

is an important cause of societal issues. This result is demonstrated in *Figure 1*, where on the x-axis is the relative cohort Black share (i.e. the share of Blacks in an individual's cohort minus the average in the school) and on the y-axis is the relative share of Blacks in an individual's

census tract around 30 years later. Again, the evidence suggests this is being driven by a change in attitudes, since effects only show up when individuals are in their 30s and 40s, when residential location choice is most influenced by individuals' preferences.

*Figure 1.*  
Correlation of relative Black shares, same sex cohort



Since racial relations in the US are very particular, it is important to test whether we observe similar patterns in Europe. Here, the most salient forms of ethnic prejudice are typically towards migrants from outside of Europe. Kalmbach *et al.* (2022) show that we observe similar effects of childhood contact in this setting – Finnish children who go to school with more immigrants or children of immigrants are more likely to go on to marry or cohabit with such a person.

In a similar context in Denmark, Merlino *et al.* (2024) then show

an impact on another outcome – who managers hire within the labour market. In particular, children who were exposed to more immigrants in school go on to hire a greater share of migrants if they become managers. While they cannot rule out that this may come partly through changes in networks, some evidence suggests a change in attitudes is a more likely. In particular, the effect extends across migrant groups with, for instance, exposure to immigrants from Pakistan increasing the probability of recruiting immigrants from other Muslim

countries. Either way, the result implies an important way to foster immigrant labour market integration may be to increase the exposure of potential recruiters to immigrants.

Overall, therefore, there is an increasing body of evidence that inter-ethnic contact in schools can have long-term impacts on the behaviour of ethnic majority individuals. This should be born in mind by policy makers when deciding upon policies that may encourage such mixing.

## References

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