ATTITUDES TOWARDS RACE AND POVERTY IN THE DEMAND FOR PRIVATE EDUCATION: THE CASE OF MISSISSIPPI

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Most studies of the demand for private education have treated “white flight” as a response to the proportion of the population that is black in a particular area. The present article, by contrast, considers the possibility that this flight may be from poverty rather than race. The article develops an aggregate demand function for private education from which individual behavior may be inferred, and then applies the model to data from Mississippi. The results suggest that prejudice is directed against poor blacks rather than against nonpoor blacks or poor whites.

Though most primary and secondary education in the United States is provided by public institutions, private schools also play a significant role. In 1980, for example, 10.6 percent of all elementary and high school students in the United States were enrolled in private schools. There are significant inter- and intrastate differences in the proportion of students enrolled in private schools. In the state of Mississippi for example, while 11.8 percent of all elementary and high school students in the state were enrolled in private schools in 1980, this number was 22.7 percent in Hancock County and only 0.6 percent in Union County. Private school choice is influenced by a number of factors, including religious preferences and dissatisfaction with the quality of public schools. One important factor that influences private school choice and has been studied extensively is aversion to the racial composition of public schools—what is commonly referred to as “white flight.”

Several studies show that the demand for private education is influenced by the racial composition of the public school. However, while
these studies demonstrate that “white flight” is directly related to the proportion of the population that is black, they do not show how whites respond to blacks in different income groups, or how well-off whites respond to poor whites. It is therefore difficult to determine whether “white flight” is flight from black students because they are black or because they are poor. This question has public policy implications going beyond those dealing with education.

The prominent sociologist William Julius Wilson in his controversial book, *The Declining Significance of Race*3 has suggested that although an individual’s race remains important, social class is becoming an increasingly significant determinant of life chances or opportunities in the black community. In Wilson’s view, this difference in opportunities is caused by the different positions of middle-income and poor blacks in the structure of an economy with a declining and changing industrial base.4 Wilson does not view discrimination as the source of this difference in life chances.5 A factor closely related to the relative opportunities of middle- and low-income blacks, however, is the differential attitudes of whites towards these two groups. Do whites exhibit stronger prejudice against poor blacks than against middle-income blacks? And, if class is important, do well-off whites avoid poor whites as well as poor blacks? A test of these hypotheses can be conducted in the context of demand for private education. Such a test may not only contribute to an understanding of the nature of prejudice, but may also help to locate the areas of greatest resistance to integration under alternative systems such as, for example, vouchers6 or “magnet schools.” In addition, it may cast some light on the political economy of public school finance.

This article looks at the factors that influence the demand for private education in the state of Mississippi.7 Unlike other work in the field, the present study looks at the demand for private schools by white families in response to the combined race and class characteristics of potential public school classmates of their children, rather than simply focusing on their response to race alone. The article is organized as follows: Section I provides a theoretical model of the demand for private education, combining individual demand functions to obtain an aggregate demand function from which individual behavior can be inferred. Section II presents empirical results, examining the reaction of well-off whites to the presence of poor blacks, poor whites, and nonpoor blacks. Section III concludes with remarks on some public policy implications of the study.