



Is immigrant neighborhood inequality less pronounced in suburban areas?



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 June 2015

Received in revised form 3 December 2015

Accepted 20 January 2016

Available online 28 January 2016

Keywords:

Neighborhood

Inequality

Suburb

Immigrant

Poverty

Segregation

ABSTRACT

We investigate suburbanization and neighborhood inequality among 14 immigrant groups using census tract data from the 2008–2012 American Community Survey. Immigrant neighborhood inequality is defined here as the degree to which immigrants reside in neighborhoods that are poorer than the neighborhoods in which native whites reside. Using city and suburb Gini coefficients which reflect the distributions of groups across neighborhoods with varying poverty rates, we find that the immigrant-white gap is attenuated in the suburbs. This finding applies to most of the nativity groups and remains after accounting for metropolitan context, the segregation of poverty, and group-specific segregation levels, poverty rates, and acculturation characteristics. Despite reduced neighborhood inequality in the suburbs, large group differences persist. A few immigrant groups achieve residential parity or better vis-à-vis suburban whites while others experience high levels of neighborhood inequality and receive marginal residential returns on suburban location.

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1. Introduction

Despite idyllic images of spacious homes, good schools, and safe streets, it is clear that portions of suburbia are struggling (Allard and Roth, 2010). Suburbs have never been quite as homogenous as popular images would have us believe (Jackson, 1987), and some suburban neighborhoods experienced a precipitous decline during the economic volatility of the 2000s. According to recent analyses by Kneebone and Berube (2013), the first decade of this century saw the suburban poverty population in the nation's largest metropolitan areas increase by 53 percent while the poverty population in cities increased by less than half that rate. As a result, 2010 became the first decennial census year in which the suburban poor outnumbered the urban poor.

At the same time, a “suburban immigrant nation” (Hardwick, 2008) has emerged in the wake of deindustrialization, dispersed employment, and new immigration from Latin America and Asia (Liu and Painter, 2011; Singer, 2005; Singer et al., 2008). The suburbs are now the first destination of many incoming immigrants rather than a residential stepping stone from the city. This trend runs counter to previous periods in which just a few gateway cities housed the bulk of the foreign-born population. As a result, three out of every five immigrants in large metropolitan areas reside in the metropolitan periphery

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(Wilson and Singer, 2010). This has contributed to the widespread diversification of communities within metropolitan areas (Lee et al., 2014) and to the emergence of “melting pot suburbs” which have blurred historical color lines (Frey, 2011).

In light of the growing suburbanization of immigrants, it is an opportune moment to reconsider the residential circumstances of immigrants in relation to the highly suburbanized U.S.-born white population. From prior research we know that immigrants tend to live in poorer neighborhoods than natives (Galster et al., 1999; Hall and Greenman, 2013; Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2007; White and Sassler, 2000) but we do not know whether the disparities are greater for immigrants who live in cities or in suburbs. Most of the research on recent immigrant settlement patterns to this point has focused on residential segregation (Cutler et al., 2008; Farrell, 2016; Hall, 2013; Iceland, 2009). However, to quote Alba et al. (2014, p. 2), “segregation research offers a limited window on residential situations: knowing how segregated a group is does not necessarily tell us what kinds of neighborhoods its members typically live in.” In fact, segregation is only one of several factors determining the degree of residential inequality for groups (Quillian, 2012).¹

Rather than using segregation as a proxy for neighborhood inequality, then, we tackle the issue directly by focusing on the degree to which immigrant groups reside in *disparate economic environments* when compared to U.S.-born whites. Specifically, we are interested in assessing whether suburbanization attenuates the immigrant-white gap in neighborhood socioeconomic conditions. While there have been efforts to measure neighborhood inequality among broadly defined ethnoracial groups (Firebaugh and Farrell, 2015; Osypuk et al., 2009; Timberlake, 2002; Timberlake and Iceland, 2007), we extend that analysis by examining neighborhood inequality broken down by suburb and city for 14 immigrant groups in the metropolitan United States. Drawing on a tailored version of the Gini index we measure immigrant neighborhood inequality using tract poverty rates from the 2008–2012 American Community Survey. Our research is guided by three questions: 1. Do immigrants experience different levels of neighborhood inequality vis-à-vis native whites in cities and suburbs? 2. Do city/suburb differences remain after taking into account metropolitan context, segregation, and socioeconomic and acculturation characteristics of immigrant groups? 3. Do immigrant neighborhood inequality patterns differ by country of origin?

The answers to these questions are not straightforward. On one hand, housing discrimination, low-density zoning, white flight, and nativist animus on the part of incumbents could produce greater suburban neighborhood inequality by pushing suburbanizing immigrants into distressed areas (Fennelly and Orfield, 2008; Odem, 2008). Alternatively, immigrants arriving in the United States with high levels of education and income may seek out suburban enclaves that are both affluent and ethnically distinct (Li, 1998, 2006; Logan et al., 2002), resulting in narrower disparities in suburban areas for certain groups. Of course, both forces could be at work, and the relative importance of the forces likely varies across the immigrant groups. Our objective in this paper is to determine whether, for each of the groups, the disparity in neighborhood poverty for immigrants and native whites tends to be greater in suburban areas or in central cities.

2. Immigrant suburbanization and neighborhood inequality

Although there is a growing literature addressing recent residential segregation patterns in the context of immigration (Farrell, 2016; Hall, 2013; Iceland, 2009; Lee et al., 2014; Lichter et al., 2010), there are significant gaps in our knowledge about *immigrant neighborhood inequality*—the degree to which immigrant groups reside in poorer neighborhoods than U.S.-born whites do—particularly with respect to suburban areas. The issue is important because residence in disadvantaged neighborhoods is associated with a variety of social ills including high school dropout (Crowder and South, 2011), violent juvenile crime (Ludwig et al., 2001), depression (Kim, 2010), lower cognitive ability (Sharkey and Elwert, 2011), and diminished life satisfaction (Firebaugh and Schroeder, 2009). Moreover, long-term exposure to localized disadvantage can have adverse effects across generations (Sharkey, 2008). Disparities in neighborhood poverty may only be partly due to aggregate differences in household income across racial and nativity groups. In New York City, for example, black and Latino immigrant families live in lower quality neighborhoods than white families even after controlling for a range of relevant household characteristics (Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2007).

Concentrated affluence also matters (Massey, 1996; Bischoff and Reardon, 2014). White populations are growing rapidly in outlying exurbs as suburbanization exacerbates the spatial segregation of prosperity (Dwyer, 2010; Frey, 2011). This has implications for racial neighborhood inequality, since affluent suburban blacks and Hispanics reside in neighborhoods with poverty rates much higher than those experienced by affluent suburban whites (Logan, 2014). However, Lee and Marlay (2007) identify substantial concentrations of immigrants in affluent neighborhoods, most of which are found in the suburbs. Combined with their additional finding that Asians are overrepresented in wealthy neighborhoods, it is possible that certain suburbanized immigrant groups could be residentially advantaged relative to suburban whites. This underscores the need to focus on specific country-of-origin groups rather than relying on broad panethnic classifications.

Suburbanization has traditionally been viewed as the spatial manifestation of acculturation and upward mobility for immigrants and their offspring (Alba and Logan, 1991; Massey, 1985). This process of spatial assimilation is predicted not only to increase residential integration with majority group households but also to improve the residential circumstances of the immigrant groups themselves (Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2007). Existing research on spatial assimilation generally focuses

¹ Hypothetically at least, native and foreign-born populations could live in segregated neighborhoods while still experiencing equivalent levels of localized poverty.

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