



# Residential hierarchy in Los Angeles: An examination of ethnic and documentation status differences



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## ABSTRACT

Longitudinal event history data from two waves of the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey are used to explore racial, ethnic, and documentation status differences in access to desirable neighborhoods. We first find that contrary to recent findings, undocumented Latinos do not replace blacks at the bottom of the locational attainment hierarchy. Whites continue to end up in neighborhoods that are less poor and whiter than minority groups, while all minorities, including undocumented Latinos, end up in neighborhoods that are of similar quality. Second, the effects of socioeconomic status for undocumented Latinos are either similar to or weaker than disadvantaged blacks. These findings suggest that living in less desirable neighborhoods is a fate disproportionately borne by non-white Los Angeles residents and that in some limited ways, the penalty attached to being undocumented Latino might actually be greater than the penalty attached to being black.

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## 1. Introduction

Recently, there has been an intense focus on the determinants of residential segregation (Farley and Frey, 1994; Frey and Farley, 1996; Iceland, 2004; Logan et al., 2004; Quillian, 2002). Scholars note that between 1990 and 2000, black segregation has somewhat declined, while Latino segregation has steadily risen (Iceland et al., 2002; Massey and Denton, 1992, 1993; Massey and Fischer, 1999; Wilkes and Iceland, 2004). The trends persist into the 2000s, with recent studies indicating that black segregation continues to decline but Latinos have become even more isolated (Logan, 2013; Sharp and Iceland, 2013).

These patterns accompany a dramatic surge in immigration from Latin American nations, producing a burgeoning literature on group differences in the quality of neighborhoods in which people reside and to which they move. Because a large proportion of new Latin American immigrants are undocumented (Passel, 2006; Passel and Cohn, 2008), they may find it difficult to achieve socioeconomic incorporation (Donato and Massey, 1993; Flippen, 2012; Hall et al., 2010; Kaushal, 2006; Kossoudji and Cobb-Clark, 2002; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2011) and residential integration with whites, and native-born blacks who are documented (Chavez, 1998; Cort, 2011; Hall and Greenman, 2013; Massey and Bartley, 2005; McConnell and Marcelli, 2007). Until recently, a lack of data permitting the direct identification of documentation status has prevented scholars from systematically investigating these possibilities. Subsequent analyses continue to fill this gap.

We update work on the patterns and determinants of racial and ethnic locational attainment in three ways. First, scholars have consistently focused on racial, ethnic and nativity status differences in neighborhood quality outcomes and have largely concluded that blacks remain at the bottom of the locational attainment ethnic hierarchy (Adelman, 2005; Alba and Logan, 1993; Friedman and Rosenbaum, 2007; Massey and Denton, 1993; Rosenbaum and Friedman, 2001; South et al., 2005,

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2008). Yet, we know of only two studies (Cort, 2011 and Hall and Greenman, 2013) that separate Latinos by nativity and documentation status and then reevaluate this ethnic hierarchy. The findings from this limited body of work are illuminating but mixed. On the one hand, Cort (2011) uses cross-sectional regional data and objective measures of neighborhood quality to show that undocumented Latinos in Los Angeles replace blacks at the bottom of the locational attainment hierarchy and that the effects of education on neighborhood quality are strongest for blacks, allowing the highly educated an opportunity to reside in communities that are of better quality than educated Latinos and Asians. On the other hand, Hall and Greenman (2013) use Survey of Income Participation (SIPP) panel data and subjective measures of neighborhood quality to demonstrate that undocumented Mexican and Central Americans are better off than their native born black counterparts. While the methodological differences between the two research designs prevent absolute reconciliation, our aim is to update Cort's work. We believe three shortcomings invite a re-evaluation of that scholarship.

First, the independent and dependent variables are measured concurrently, undermining readers' ability to identify the causal relationships in the models, thereby complicating the ability to distinguish the effects of documentation and racial status from that of unobserved individual differences. It is possible that documentation status plays only a limited role in determining access to quality neighborhoods when unobserved individual differences are held constant. We address this issue by using panel data and controlling for the quality of neighborhood where the respondents previously lived. The lagged dependent variable absorbs unobserved individual differences that are associated with residential outcomes and thus provide a lower bound or more conservative estimate for the effect of group membership.

Second, although Cort confirms past scholarship by reporting that the effects of educational attainment are strongest for blacks, little attention is paid to how the effects of socioeconomic status for undocumented Latinos compare to other groups, especially native-born blacks. We improve upon this work by examining group differences in the effects of socioeconomic resources on residential outcomes, allowing us to provide a more comprehensive picture of the spatial stratification process.

Third, we follow South and his colleagues (South et al., 2005, 2008) in taking a multi-dimensional approach to measuring neighborhood quality in Los Angeles County. The majority of past work measures neighborhood quality using the percent non-Hispanic white. The logic is that white neighborhoods generally have social amenities that make them more desirable to residents. However, Los Angeles has diverse neighborhoods with the same desirable qualities as white neighborhoods (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr, 1997). Poor neighborhoods (such as those with high poverty rates) lack many desirable qualities as well as social characteristics that help to stabilize communities (Wilson, 1987, 1996), making the neighborhood poverty rate an acceptable measure of neighborhood quality (see South et al., 2005). Therefore, in addition to the percent non-Hispanic white in neighborhoods, we measure neighborhood quality using the neighborhood poverty rate. This allows us to both broaden our conceptualization of neighborhood quality and connect our findings to the literature on the dynamics of concentrated urban poverty (Massey et al., 1994; South and Crowder, 1997; South et al., 2005; Wilson, 1987, 1996).

In all, we believe that a re-examination of Cort's (2011) work in Los Angeles is needed now that recent scholarship using national data has produced mixed findings concerning the effects of undocumented status on locational attainment outcomes. We focus on Los Angeles specifically and utilize a case-study approach. Although Los Angeles is not representative of the US population, its large undocumented Latino population and the great diversity in socioeconomic resources within each immigrant group make it a meaningful case that sheds light into the future residential outcomes of the US population.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Spatial assimilation and place stratification

Analyses focusing on group differences in residential mobility outcomes are generally organized around two theories of locational attainment: spatial assimilation and place stratification.<sup>1</sup> The spatial assimilation model (Massey, 1985) is conceptually similar to the status attainment model (Blau and Duncan, 1967) in that both are concerned with the social processes through which individuals convert their ascribed and achieved statuses into placement in a social hierarchy. However, while the status attainment model is concerned with individuals' placement in high status occupations, the spatial assimilation model focuses on individuals' placement in high quality neighborhoods. Indeed, an important part of moving up the socioeconomic hierarchy involves attaining residence in a desirable community. Thus, when individuals leave undesirable neighborhoods for more desirable ones, this is a social process similar to earning more education, income, or job status.

Proponents of the model argue that minorities seek to turn their financial and human capital endowments into geographic proximity to whites and into residence low poverty neighborhoods (Massey, 1985; South et al., 2005). They do so because white and non-poor neighborhoods generally have the best schools, the highest property values, the best groceries and the lowest crime rates, making them highly desirable. In a meritocratic society when minorities acquire more human and financial capital, their chances of living in these neighborhoods should increase. Therefore, any gross differences between whites and minorities in locational attainment outcomes should be explained by individual-level resources such as income, educational attainment, and wealth (Alba and Nee, 1997, 2003).

<sup>1</sup> Freeman (2000) advances a third theoretical framework that is often ignored in the spatial assimilation framework: residential preferences. The idea is that in individual agency is an important determinant of residential outcomes. We note it here but do not incorporate it into the theoretical framework or test it because we have no rigorous measures of residential preferences in the data we will use for this paper. We do however agree that residential preferences are an important part of the story that we omit.

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