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Declining segregation through the lens of neighborhood quality: Does middle-class and affluent status bring equality?

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ABSTRACT

Middle- and upper-class status along with suburban residence are together considered symbolic of the American dream. However, the question of whether they mean access to better quality residential environments has gone largely unexplored. This study relies on data from the 2009 panel of the American Housing Survey and focuses on a range of neighborhood conditions, including indicators of physical and social disorder as well as housing value and a neighborhood rating. Contrary to the tenets of the spatial assimilation model, we find that middle-class and affluent status do not consistently lead to superior conditions for all households. Neighborhood circumstances vary considerably based on household race and ethnicity, with blacks and Hispanics experiencing the greatest disparities from whites. In addition, suburban residence does not attenuate such differences, and in some cases, well-to-do minorities do even worse than whites in neighborhood quality in suburbs.

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1. Introduction

Residential segregation, particularly between blacks and whites, is on the decline. Logan (2011, p. 5) finds that the average black–white index of dissimilarity scores in metropolitan America decreased from 73 in 1980 to 59 in 2010. For Hispanics during the same period, average levels of segregation, which are lower than that between blacks and whites, dropped more minimally from 50 in 1980 to 48 in 2010 (Logan, 2011, p. 11). Suburbs, which have long been associated with prosperous white communities, have seen a far greater representation of minorities (Denton and Gibbons, 2013). In 2010, 51% of blacks lived in suburbs, up from 37% in 1990, and the percentage of Hispanics in suburbs rose to 59% from 47% (Frey, 2011, p. 10). While declines in segregation have been found to be slower in suburbs than in cities (Denton and Gibbons, 2013; Fischer, 2008), these are still promising signs that greater racial integration is taking place.

Whether concurrent trends of declining segregation and the growing presence of minorities in suburbs have translated into better residential conditions for individual minorities, particularly those of middle-class and affluent backgrounds, relative to whites, is not well known. Some scholars argue that economic differences between whites and minorities are directly linked to residential segregation (Clark, 2007; Patterson, 1997; Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997). Therefore, declines in segregation should result in more equality in the neighborhood quality between middle- and upper-class

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minorities and whites. However, existing research on race and class has found that while segregation for middle class minorities has declined, it remains high for blacks (Fischer, 2003; Iceland et al., 2005; Iceland and Wilkes, 2006; Massey and Fischer, 1999). The persistence of prejudices and negative out-group preferences (Charles, 2000; Farley et al., 1994; Krysan and Farley, 2002) as well as discrimination, particularly in the form of racial and ethnic steering, will make minorities more disadvantaged in their residential outcomes, relative to whites, no matter how much the class-status gap is closed between minorities and whites (Massey and Denton, 1993; Massey and Fischer, 1999; Turner et al., 2002).

The lack of research on this topic is surprising given that the disparities in wealth between whites and minorities persist (Conley, 1999; Oliver and Shapiro, 1995). Housing and neighborhood conditions have been found to be key factors influencing housing values, which in turn help explain the wealth differences between householders (Fesselmeier et al., 2013; Flippen, 2004). In 2009, the median net worth of households with a non-Hispanic white householder was \$113,149, almost 20 times the median net worth of households with a black householder (\$5677) or Hispanic householder (\$6325) (Kochhar et al., 2011, p. 5). Given that black and Hispanic wealth is much more dependent on their residential circumstances, knowing more about the quality of neighborhoods in which middle class or affluent blacks and Hispanics live, especially if we define such class backgrounds as including homeownership, is important as is focusing on those who live in suburbs where homeownership is even greater (Conley, 1999; Kochhar, 2004; Oliver and Shapiro, 1995).

While there is some research that explores the effects of class and socioeconomic status on residential segregation at an aggregate level (Fischer, 2003; Iceland and Wilkes, 2006; Iceland et al., 2005; Massey and Fischer, 1999), to our knowledge, only three quantitative studies exist in the literature that directly examine the locational attainment of middle-class or affluent blacks (Adelman, 2004, 2005; Alba et al., 2000). They find that race continues to be important in influencing their residential attainment. Although middle-class blacks have greater shares of whites in their neighborhoods, relative to other blacks, the whites are less affluent than those residing in middle-class white neighborhoods. However, these studies are limited in a number of ways. They do not examine the locational attainment of middle- and upper-class minorities on a national level. The data utilized within these studies are based upon data from the 1990 decennial census or the 1992–1994 MultiCity Study of Urban Inequality, which are about 20 years old (Adelman, 2004, 2005; Alba et al., 2000). Neighborhoods within these studies are defined at the census-tract level and not as the characteristics near the person's housing unit, which potentially underestimates the true extent to which middle-class and affluent minorities experience the negative effects of residential segregation. Finally, these studies do not examine the locational attainment of such well-to-do households in suburbs, which is surprising given that many of these households reside in suburbs as well as the fact that suburban residence is considered the pinnacle of achievement in locational attainment models (Alba and Logan, 1991; Fischer, 2008; Friedman and Rosenbaum, 2007; Logan and Alba, 1993; Massey and Denton, 1985, 1988).

In addition to the aforementioned limitations of previous research, almost no research has directly examined the residential outcomes of middle-class or affluent Hispanics and Asians.² One exception is a study by Logan (2011) that examines the average neighborhood quality of poor, middle income, and affluent whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians using 2005–2009 data from the American Community Survey.³ Logan (2011) finds that well-to-do blacks and Hispanics live in poorer neighborhoods than their white counterparts. While this study updates the older research on this topic and offers a broader focus on non-black minorities, it is limited because it is a descriptive analysis that does not control for other factors that could impact the gap in neighborhood quality between well-to-do whites and minorities, namely educational attainment, housing tenure, and suburban location.

The question that remains is how important are race and ethnicity in predicting middle-class and affluent household locational attainment in the 21st century, given the declines that have occurred in segregation during the past few decades. To address this issue, we conduct bivariate and multivariate analyses of data from the 2009 panel of the American Housing Survey (AHS). The distinct advantages of these data are that they are at the national level, and contain respondents' reports of the physical conditions of their neighborhoods in terms of the presence of abandoned buildings, buildings with bars on the windows, trash/litter/junk, open spaces within a half a block of their housing unit, how residents rank their neighborhoods, and residents' perceptions of crime. Such perception-based measures of residential circumstances have been shown to be significantly related to more objective indicators (Elo et al., 2009) and have been linked in explaining variation in individual health outcomes (Chang et al., 2009; Vinikoor-Imlera et al., 2011; Weden et al., 2008). In addition, the AHS includes household reports of their housing values, which is likely to directly reflect the quality of their neighborhoods. Several questions are addressed using these data: (1) Do racial and ethnic differences in neighborhood outcomes exist among middle-class and affluent households?⁴ (2) To the extent that differences exist, are they smaller in suburbs? (3) If racial and ethnic differences exist, do they disappear when controlling for relevant demographic and socioeconomic factors?

² There are a number of studies that examine middle-class and affluent African American communities (for example: Lacy, 2007; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999) or middle-class and affluent Hispanic communities (for example: Bean et al., 2001; Brown, 2007; Delgado, 2010; Kochhar, 2004; Vallejo, 2010, 2012; Vallejo and Lee, 2009) without exploring locational attainment directly.

³ Logan (2011, p. 18) defines neighborhoods as a census tract plus each adjacent tract. In the report, he primarily focuses on the results of neighborhood quality defined by the percentage of families living in poverty, although his conclusions also draw upon tabulations using the following measures of neighborhood quality: median income, per capita income, education, occupation, homeownership, housing vacancy, native-born share of the population, and percent immigrants who arrived recently.

⁴ As discussed in Section 4 below, our study differs from Logan's (2011) study because we define middle-class and affluent households on the basis of their income, housing tenure, and educational level. Logan (2011) only focuses on the income to poverty ratio.

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