Immigrant Residential Patterns in U.S. Metropolitan Areas, 1990-2000*

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Abstract

This analysis examines the applicability of the "spatial assimilation" model for understanding patterns of immigrant settlement by looking at segregation in 1990 and 2000 for various racial and ethnic groups by nativity, country of origin, and timing of immigration. Findings provide qualified moderate support for spatial assimilation: while the foreign-born as a whole became more segregated between 1990 and 2000, we see that more recent arrivals in a given census year have higher levels of segregation than those who immigrated earlier, and the segregation for approximate cohorts of immigrants also declined modestly from 1990 to 2000. The main reason for the overall increase in segregation for the foreign-born between the censuses is thus due to a compositional shift: many of the foreign-born are recent arrivals. Results also indicate that spatial assimilation is an uneven process, as segregation patterns of the foreign-born vary considerably by race/ethnicity and country of origin.

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A number of recent studies have shown that residential segregation among various Asian and Hispanic groups has remained the same or increased in recent decades, even as African American segregation has declined (Iceland et al. 2002; Lewis Mumford Center 2001). In an era when racial polarization is thought to be declining somewhat—as evidenced by the declines in African American segregation—the trends for Hispanics and Asians might seem both striking and puzzling. Some observers have posited that high levels of immigration likely affected these patterns, as new immigrants often settle in ethnic enclaves even as longer-term residents may disperse into outlying areas. The fact that segregation has not declined for Asians and Hispanics may be due to the concentration of new immigrants outweighing the residential dispersion of longer-term residents. This study therefore seeks to shed light on the effects of nativity and race in producing observed residential patterns.

Understanding these processes is important because they provide insight on how patterns of interaction between racial and ethnic groups have changed and the potential role of immigration in affecting these patterns. For example, if findings of this research provide support for the "spatial assimilation" model—that recent immigrants are highly segregated but that segregation declines the longer they are in the U.S.—then this would indicate that over time we should expect to see increasing interaction between these minority groups and Whites in shared neighborhoods. This could therefore lead to (and be a reflection of) lower social, economic, and political polarization between these groups. Just as White ethnic groups at one time occupied very different residential niches and were thought by themselves and others as comprising very different racial groups, over time many of these differences diminished and more common identities were forged (Waters 1990).

On the other hand, if findings indicate that immigration is not explaining some of the changes, then it could indicate that racial and ethnic polarization is increasing. For example, the rapid growth of Hispanic and Asian populations could conceivably be producing a "backlash" among the native-born White population, which could be reflected either by the mass movement of Whites out of neighborhoods with growing minority populations or in an increase in discrimination in the housing market that would limit the residential mobility of minority group members into predominately White neighborhoods. This rapid population growth could also more simply produce a rise in the number and effectiveness of group communities and institutions that serve community member needs—institutions that would not be created without a critical mass of that group present in a particular area. Any of these mechanisms could produce increases in residential segregation between these groups and non-Hispanic Whites. The implication of this scenario is that we would not necessarily see greater inter-group interaction in the near future. Finally, results could provide mixed support for the spatial assimilation model, as we could see that the model helps explain residential patterns of Hispanic and Asian immigrants, but not Black immigrants.

In short, more detailed analyses are needed to provide insight on the role of nativity and timing of immigration in producing observed patterns. More specifically, this research is guided by the following questions: 1) How do levels of residential segregation vary by race, nativity (whether foreign-born or not), and country of origin? 2) Is residential segregation lower for immigrants who have been in the country longer than recent arrivals? 3) Are immigrants of various racial and ethnic groups more segregated from non-Hispanic Whites than the native-born of those groups, even after controlling various characteristics such as socioeconomic status? 4) Does nativity have a much larger effect on the residential patterns of some groups, such as

Hispanics and Asians, than others, such as Blacks? 5) Does race matter more for Black immigrants than Asian and Hispanic immigrants in determining their levels of residential segregation?

Using data from internal 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses, we produce residential segregation indexes (dissimilarity and isolation indexes) for various racial/ethnic groups by nativity, country of origin, and, among the foreign-born, year of entry in the U.S. This is followed by a multivariate analysis of the effect of nativity and year of entry on these residential patterns. The analysis will contribute to the residential segregation literature in at least three ways. First, the use of restricted data from the Census Bureau allows a calculation of detailed segregation scores not previously tabulated. For example, we will produce segregation indexes by both country of birth and length of time in the U.S. that will permit explicit links between immigration and residential patterns to be drawn. Second, this study will examine and compare the roles of race *and* nativity in producing observed residential patterns. There are only a limited number of studies on these issues. Third, unlike most existing research, this study will go beyond producing only descriptive statistics of segregation by estimating multivariate models to test the effect of race and nativity on residential patterns, controlling for various socioeconomic factors.