BLACK RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION
IN THE CITY AND SUBURBS OF DETROIT:
Does Socioeconomic Status Matter?

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ABSTRACT: According to ecological theory, the socioeconomic status of a minority group is inversely related to the group's level of residential segregation from the majority group. This article determines whether the level of black socioeconomic status is related to the level of black residential segregation in the city of Detroit and Detroit's suburbs. Data were obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990 Summary Tape Files 4-A. The methods employed to measure residential segregation were the indexes of dissimilarity D and isolation P*. Indexes were computed by census tract to measure segregation and isolation between blacks and whites at the same level of occupation, income, or education. The results revealed that residential segregation between blacks and whites remained high (i.e., above 50%) in both the city and the suburbs despite comparable socioeconomic status. Blacks in the suburbs were more segregated and isolated than blacks in the city at each socioeconomic level.

Ecological theory has often been used to explain the residential location of ethnic and racial groups in metropolitan areas. According to this theory, the residential location of groups is linked to its socioeconomic status (Burgess, 1923; Park, 1926). When ethnic and racial residential segregation occurs between groups, it is often attributed to differences in levels of education, occupation, or income (Massey, 1979). Ecological theory also suggests a link between social and spatial mobility. Higher status groups are more likely to live in the suburbs where minority and majority groups are presumed to be less segregated.

SEGREGATION IN CITIES AND SUBURBS

The analytical objectives of this article are twofold: (1) to determine whether the level of black residential segregation from whites remains high even when blacks and whites have comparable levels of education, occupation, or income; and (2) to determine whether blacks in the city of Detroit

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are more segregated and isolated than blacks in the suburbs when socioeconomic status is controlled. The first theoretical objective of this research is to assess a question raised by several previous researchers (see Farley, 1995; Massey & Denton, 1993). A second theoretical objective is to assess whether blacks in the central city of a large, non-Western, metropolitan area are more segregated than blacks in the suburbs. It is a commonly held belief that blacks in the suburbs are less segregated than blacks in the city due to the comparable levels of socioeconomic status between suburban blacks and whites. Both theoretical objectives have implications for the findings of Clark and Ware (1997) which showed decreased residential segregation with increased levels of socioeconomic status in Southern California.

Prior research generally confirms the ecological theory that residential segregation between ethnic groups is directly associated with measurable differences in social and economic variables (Darroch & Marston, 1971; Guest & Weed, 1976; Lieberson, 1963; Massey, 1979; Massey & Denton, 1993; Taeuber & Taeuber, 1964). However, ecological theory inadequately explains the residential segregation of blacks in metropolitan areas.

Over the last 30 years, scholars have addressed the question of whether the lower socioeconomic status of blacks explained their high level of residential segregation and low level of suburbanization (Darden, 1987a; Denton & Massey, 1988; Erbe, 1975; Farley, 1975, 1977, 1991; Farley & Allen, 1987; Hermelin & Farley, 1973; Massey & Denton, 1993; Taeuber, 1968; Taeuber & Taeuber, 1965). The researchers computed segregation scores while holding constant the influence of socioeconomic status. The empirical research has overwhelmingly shown that segregation is uniformly high between blacks and whites with equal incomes. Blacks and whites earning $30,000 per year are no less segregated from each other than blacks and whites earning $5,000 per year (Darden, 1987b).

Most empirical studies show that blacks and whites in poverty usually live in separate neighborhoods, as do affluent blacks and whites (Farley, 1977). If families were distributed over neighborhoods on the basis of income instead of race, racial residential segregation in cities and their suburbs would be low (Downing & Gladstone, 1989; Farley & Colasanto, 1980). These studies were done before availability of the 1990 census data.

Other authors who have used 1990 census data to assess the impact of income on rates of segregation have found conflicting results. Farley (1995) examined the extent to which racial residential segregation in metropolitan St. Louis was attributed to differences in income and housing costs between blacks and whites. The author measured residential segregation within household income categories using an indirect, standardization method. The results revealed that blacks at all income levels were segregated from whites with similar incomes. Farley concluded that if income and housing costs were the only causes of segregation, blacks and whites in St. Louis would be far less segregated. The proportion of residential segregation that could be attributed to differences in income and housing costs was even lower in 1990 than in previous decades.

Farley (1995) specifically states that:

[R]ace still matters in determining where people live...[R]ace may matter even more than it has in the past... The findings reported here show that the effects of such racial processes are far more important than income, housing cost, and affordability as causes of racial housing segregation. Relative to those economic factors, such racial processes may be even more important today than they have been in the past (pp. 252-253).

Farley's (1995) analysis, however, only applied to St. Louis. Therefore, the findings may not apply to other regions of the country. Contrary to Farley's (1995) findings is Clark and Ware's (1997) analysis of black residential segregation and socioeconomic status in the Southern California counties of Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura. They computed dissimilarity and relative exposure indices across census tracts for five categories of income and seven categories of education. They then compared blacks and whites in the same income and education categories. Their results showed decreased residential segregation with increased levels of black socioeconomic status. Clark and Ware (1997) focused on Southern California which limited the generalizability of their results to a single state. Their results showed that blacks with similar income and educational status...
to whites remained highly segregated in Southern California. According to the ecological theory, 
black and white residential segregation should be low given the same socioeconomic status between 
the two groups. The evidence, therefore, is inconclusive and suggests the need for further research. 

Researchers comparing cities and suburbs have employed two theoretical models to explain resi-
dential segregation. One is the spatial assimilation model that is often viewed as an extension of the 
ecological tradition (Massey, 1985). This model associates an increase in a minority group’s social 
mobility with their residential mobility. Socioeconomic mobility is accompanied by a movement to 
suburban communities with better amenities and a greater presence of the white majority (Alba & 
Logan, 1993).

The second model is place stratification: a perspective that assumes places are ordered hierarchi-
cally and that suburban places have higher status than central city locations. Similarly, racial and 
etnic groups are sorted by place according to each group’s relative standing in society. This limits 
the spatial mobility of certain minority groups from residing in the same neighborhoods as whites 
with comparable income, education, and occupation. This model implies that some groups, e.g., blacks, 
are not able to fully convert socioeconomic gains into better residential choices by moving into the 
same neighborhoods as the white majority (Alba & Logan, 1993). Consistent with these two theo-
retical models, some researchers have found that black suburbanization leads to a reduction in resi-
dential segregation. However, the degree of reduction reported varied across the metropolitan areas 
that were studied (Alba & Logan, 1993; James, 1994; Massey & Denton, 1988; Wilger, 1988).

Wilger (1988) attributed the decline in residential segregation to the construction of new housing 
by arguing that as more housing is built to replace existing housing, or as blacks continue to move to 
the suburbs, residential segregation will continue to decline. James (1994) examined black and His-
panic segregation in Denver and its suburbs and found that the movement of blacks to the suburbs of 
Denver resulted in remarkable progress toward neighborhood racial integration. He found that blacks 
in the suburbs were less segregated than their counterparts in the city of Denver. He cautioned, how-
ever, that the pattern found in Denver, and perhaps in other Western metropolitan areas, may differ 
from other parts of the United States.

Massey and Denton’s (1988) research revealed that levels of segregation varied by geographic 
region. The black population in the West was much more spatially dispersed than in other regions. 
Massey and Gross (1991) found that during the 1970s, neighborhood segregation diminished most 
rapidly in Western metropolitan areas. The authors attribute this to the size of the black population. 
Declines in segregation occurred primarily in areas where the percentage of blacks was relatively 
small.

The above results may appear closer to those reported by Schneider and Phelan (1993). Their 
research revealed that an increase in black suburbanization does not necessarily mean that large num-
bers of suburban communities are becoming more integrated (Schneider & Phelan, 1993). Schneider 
and Phelan examined all suburbs (in 1980) with populations greater than 2,500 located in the 100 
largest metropolitan regions in the United States. They found that, despite increased suburbanization, 
blacks still were channeled into a relatively few suburban municipalities.

This article focuses on Detroit, a non-Western, metropolitan area in the Midwest with a large, 
predominantly black population in its central city. It should provide more insight into the city and 
suburbs debate on black segregation. The results may show that the pattern of segregation and iso-
lation due to an increase in socioeconomic status in the West is not a national pattern. The Detroit 
analysis should also shed more light on the debate as to whether higher levels of socioeconomic 
status associated with blacks’ suburbanization yield lower segregation and isolation levels than in 
the city.

THE RESEARCH SETTING

Metropolitan Detroit’s central city is the largest, predominantly black city in the United States. In 
1990, blacks numbered 774,500 or 75% of the city’s population of 1,026,670. Within the metropoli-
tan tri-county area. 92% of whites resided in suburban municipalities, while only 8% resided in the 
city.

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TABLE 5

Residential Segregation and Isolation Between Blacks and Whites with the Same Levels of Household Income for Detroit City, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>No. of Whites</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>No. of Blacks</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>Segregation Index D</th>
<th>Isolation Index P*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LESS THAN $14,999</td>
<td>35,182</td>
<td>37.98</td>
<td>121,103</td>
<td>44.94</td>
<td>64.69</td>
<td>11.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 TO $34,999</td>
<td>30,900</td>
<td>33.36</td>
<td>75,684</td>
<td>28.09</td>
<td>66.18</td>
<td>14.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000 TO $74,999</td>
<td>22,633</td>
<td>24.44</td>
<td>61,711</td>
<td>22.91</td>
<td>66.38</td>
<td>13.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 OR MORE</td>
<td>3,906</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>10,959</td>
<td>4.07</td>
<td>64.87</td>
<td>13.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Households</td>
<td>92,621</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>269,457</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>86.53</td>
<td>13.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed by the authors from data obtained from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population and Housing Summary Tape File 4A, 1993. PB 65 (Universe: Households).

black households in the suburbs are more segregated from white households at all income levels. The range of segregation levels between black and white households in the suburbs was 76.1 to 82.1%, with a mean of 78.8%. On average, 78.8% of black households would have to move in order to achieve even spatial distribution with white households at the same income level.

The isolation index $P^*$ shows a consistent pattern with the segregation index $D$. The mean isolation index is 13.2 for black and white households at the same income level for the city of Detroit (Table 5). This is lower than the 47 mean isolation index for black and white households at the same income level in the suburbs (Table 6).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This article shows that socioeconomic status has little influence on the high level of black residential segregation and isolation in the city of Detroit or its suburbs. Based upon results from the 1990 STF4 census tapes and controlling for all educational, occupational, and income levels, the findings show that blacks remained highly segregated and isolated from whites at all socioeconomic levels. Furthermore, blacks in the suburbs were more segregated and isolated from whites than blacks in the city of Detroit at each educational, occupational, and income level (Figures 2 and 3).

The mean segregation level in the city of Detroit where blacks and whites have the same educational level is 62.3%. This is 16 percentage points lower than the mean of 78.6% segregation level in

TABLE 6

Residential Segregation and Isolation Between Blacks and Whites with the Same Levels of Household Income for the Suburban Area of Detroit, 1990

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>No. of Whites</th>
<th>% White</th>
<th>No. of Blacks</th>
<th>% Black</th>
<th>Segregation Index D</th>
<th>Isolation Index P*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LESS THAN $14,999</td>
<td>146,604</td>
<td>14.70</td>
<td>17,514</td>
<td>31.45</td>
<td>82.13</td>
<td>31.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000 TO $34,999</td>
<td>276,258</td>
<td>27.71</td>
<td>14,640</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>77.71</td>
<td>49.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000 TO $74,999</td>
<td>420,560</td>
<td>42.18</td>
<td>18,116</td>
<td>32.53</td>
<td>79.02</td>
<td>50.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 OR MORE</td>
<td>153,748</td>
<td>15.42</td>
<td>5,417</td>
<td>9.73</td>
<td>76.13</td>
<td>55.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Households</td>
<td>997,170</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>55,687</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>78.75</td>
<td>46.96</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Computed by the authors from data obtained from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Population and Housing Summary Tape File 4A, 1993. PB 65 (Universe: Households).
the suburbs where blacks and whites have the same educational level. Furthermore, the mean segregation level in the city of Detroit where blacks and whites have the same occupation is 66.9%. This is 11.9 percentage points lower than the mean of 78.8% segregation level in the suburbs where blacks and whites have the same occupational level. Finally, the mean segregation level in the city where blacks and whites have the same level of household income is 65.5%. This is 13 percentage points lower than the mean of 78.8% segregation level in the suburbs where blacks and whites have the same level of household income.

The $P^*$ isolation index also revealed a segregation pattern similar to the index of dissimilarity $D$. Blacks were more isolated in the suburbs than in the city of Detroit at every educational, occupational, and income level. This consistent pattern of lower segregation and isolation in the city versus the suburbs suggests the weakness of socioeconomic status variables in influencing black segregation. It is clear, therefore, that policies designed to address segregation must give greater attention to racial barriers rather than class barriers.

The patterns in Figures 2 and 3 can be partially explained by the restriction of blacks who reside in suburban housing to only a few suburban areas. Most suburbs of Detroit remain exclusively white and maintain high levels of segregation and isolation regardless of socioeconomic status or black suburbanization. This study has demonstrated that black suburbanization in Detroit does not assure black residential integration even when blacks have equal socioeconomic status with whites.

Given that our results were based on an analysis of the Detroit metropolitan area, further study of other metropolitan regions is necessary to determine if the findings apply elsewhere. The central city of Detroit is unique because it is the largest predominantly black city in the United States. Also, the Detroit metropolitan area is different because it has maintained a high segregation index over a period of 30 years (1960–1990), without any reduction, even after passage of the Federal Fair Housing Act. These unique racial characteristics may help explain why our results are different from those reported by James’s (1994) study of Denver and Clark and Ware’s (1997) study of Southern California.

The significance of our results is related to the comparison of blacks in the city with blacks in the suburbs with the same socioeconomic levels. Ecological theory and past research on residential seg-
regation suggest that blacks in the central city are more segregated than blacks in the suburbs (Massey & Denton, 1988). Ecological theory maintains that as members of minority groups establish themselves in the labor market, they leave behind the less successful members of their group and convert socioeconomic gains into residential gain by purchasing residences in the suburbs. This pattern of social and spatial mobility would result in increased contact with the white majority (Alba & Logan, 1993). Our empirical findings contradict established ecological theory.

Instead the results lend support to what Alba and Logan (1993) call the place stratification model. In this model, residential proximity to whites is determined substantially by race and is not significantly affected by other individual characteristics because most whites continue to seek social distance from blacks. Blacks are not able to fully convert their socioeconomic gains into residence in the same communities as the white majority due to private and public discrimination. Moreover, most whites have little difficulty avoiding suburban neighborhoods with disproportionate numbers of black residents even when they have equal socioeconomic resources as the black residents (Alba & Logan, 1993).

Our findings provide more insight to the debate about the relative roles of socioeconomic status and race in explaining residential segregation in the nineties. Our findings contradict those of Clark and Ware (1997) who concluded that in Southern California counties, increased economic gains by blacks resulted in decreased residential segregation. Because our study and the study by Clark and Ware (1997) are case studies in different regions of the United States, it is too soon to tell which findings reflect a national pattern.

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REFERENCES


