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BECOMING NEIGHBORS OR REMAINING STRANGERS? LATINOS AND RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION IN THE HEARTLAND

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ABSTRACT—Debate persists about the dynamics of segregation and their consequences for Latinos as well as others. This paper draws from the most recent census to examine these dynamics and their consequences in three midwestern cities: Omaha, Lincoln, and Lexington. By shifting the focus to new centers of Latino population growth, we clarify the complexities of Hispanic segregation across the United States. Our findings extend and inform previous debates in several ways. Using the index of dissimilarity, we find evidence of *rising* segregation in Omaha and Lincoln while Lexington appears a model of integration, at least at first glance. Class factors, in part, account for these disparate patterns. However, the evidence also points to the continuing significance of race/ethnicity. Most telling perhaps is evidence of white flight across all three cities, suggesting that current debates must be broadened to include micropolitan areas like Lexington as well as metropolitan areas. Though problematic on many levels, the dynamics of segregation that we uncover have not had as devastating a set of

consequences for Latinos in the Heartland as for others. Rather, split labor markets have created a set of job opportunities in the meatpacking industry that in turn provide a measure of economic stability for Hispanic enclaves, at least in the short term. This finding further pushes scholars to theorize the complex ways in which class factors tied largely to local labor markets intersect with cultural barriers as well as racial bias to shape the fate of Latinos across the United States.

Key Words: immigration, Latinos, segregation

Introduction

Residential segregation represents perhaps the most pervasive form of marginalization Latinos face in cities like Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York, where many are confined to neighborhoods that are geographically and socially isolated from majority white neighborhoods.¹ To some extent the “ethnic enclaves” in which Latinos are concentrated sustain cultural traditions and social networks that serve as resources to negotiate the challenges of assimilation. However, many scholars maintain that segregation of this sort can also be problematic, given that it often creates politically and socially marginalized “hyperghettos” plagued with high poverty, school failure, and crime. In many cities, Latino immigrants have been able to escape these high-poverty neighborhoods as they accumulate money, moving from rentals in predominantly Hispanic barrios to homeownership in more integrated and affluent neighborhoods—reminiscent of the patterns of ethnic succession identified by Park and Burgess at the turn of the twentieth century. In the past decade, however, many Latinos have encountered rising levels of segregation, fueled in part by the most recent wave of immigration.

The dynamics and distinct patterns of Latino segregation across time and place remain inadequately understood given two biases in previous research. On the one hand, scholars have emphasized a black-white paradigm (Charles 2003). On the other hand, most research has focused attention on the largest metropolitan areas, largely ignoring midsized cities and small towns. Residential segregation in cities like Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, which rank among the most segregated, provides the focus for the vast majority of studies, both quantitative and qualitative (Glazer and Moynihan 1970; Moore 1978; Hirsch 1983; Wilson 1996; Alba et al. 1997, 2000; Darden and Kamel 2000; O'Connor et al. 2001). The limited scope of this research is particularly problematic given the dramatic growth of the Latino population in recent years coupled with new settlement patterns. According to the most recent census,

the Latino population grew nationally by 60% this past decade—and the most dramatic increases were registered in smaller cities and towns rather than in the largest metropolitan areas. This increase is particularly evident in the Midwest, where the Hispanic population rose from 1,727,000 to 3,125,000 in the last 10 years, a growth rate exceeded only across the South (U.S. Census Bureau 1995a; Gouveia and Saenz 2000; U.S. Census Bureau 2001; Ravuri 2003). In some cities and towns, Latinos now outnumber native-born whites.

This paper draws from the U.S. Census and several other sources to examine the dynamics of residential segregation that Latinos face in both the mid-sized cities and smaller towns of the Great Plains. More specifically, we examine the segregation of Latinos in three Nebraska cities: Omaha, Lincoln, and Lexington. Nebraska is among those midwestern states that have seen the Latino population increase most dramatically since 1990, rising from 36,969 to 94,425 (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). Most of this growth has been fueled by immigration, as the most recent Hispanic population figures include 30,452 foreign-born Mexicans. Omaha and Lincoln are in many ways typical of the mid-sized cities that have become home to Latinos across the Midwest, remaining predominantly white even as the number of Hispanics rises. Lexington, on the other hand, is typical of smaller towns such as Crete, Nebraska City, and Schuyler that have seen the Hispanic population, drawn by the lure of meatpacking jobs, grow most rapidly.

The experiences of Latinos across these cities will in large part be shaped by the residential segregation they encounter. We examine this segregation guided by several questions. How do the levels of segregation facing Latinos in these cities compare to the segregation they encounter in larger cities like Chicago? Are the dynamics of segregation similar or distinct? Finally, what are the consequences of this segregation for the neighborhoods in which Latinos are concentrated? These issues are central to understanding the diversity of Latino experiences across the United States and the conditions that contribute to residential integration in some cases and marginalization in others.

Residential Segregation, Ethnic Enclaves, and Urban “Ghettos”

In general, scholars and the public alike are more mixed in their assessment of residential segregation than other forms of segregation. To some extent, residential segregation has been romanticized through its link to ethnic enclaves. Ethnic enclaves—or neighborhoods built along ethnic lines with distinctive ethnic identities—are typically traced to the struggles of those immigrants who poured into cities like Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century.

In these cities, newly arrived immigrants from the same country settled in the same neighborhoods as a way to negotiate the challenges posed by language barriers, job discrimination, and, more generally, anti-immigrant hostility. The social networks that emerged in these neighborhoods provided not only social support but also “social capital”—or access to job networks, lending networks, and other economic and political resources that made survival, economic security, and in time, upward mobility possible. Today the many “Little Italies,” “Chinatowns,” and other ethnic enclaves that emerged from this struggle are widely treated by scholars, politicians, and the public as testament to the resourcefulness and resilience of immigrants faced with difficult circumstances (Liebersohn 1963, 1980; Portes and Jensen 1989; Zhou and Logan 1991; Waters and Eschbach 1995).

More broadly, these histories of early-20th-century immigration and ethnic enclaves provide the foundation for the spatial assimilation model that has dominated studies of residential segregation (Charles 2003). In general, this model ties segregation as well as integration to class and culture. From this perspective, ethnic enclaves reflect the preferences and choices of newly arrived immigrants whose residential options are limited by social class and cultural barriers. At least initially, immigrants choose to settle in neighborhoods that are home to others of similar national origin given that they typically arrive in the United States with few economic resources, limited cultural and language proficiency and limited job networks. Kinship as well as other ties to immigrants of similar national origin draw them willingly into ethnic enclaves that provide a sense of community as well economic and social capital. As they accumulate capital, most immigrants move from these ethnic enclaves into more integrated neighborhoods as part of a broader process of assimilation. Homeownership is central to this process, as immigrants use the economic resources they accumulate as they experience upward mobility to buy homes in predominantly white neighborhoods. As a result, ethnic enclaves have historically proven to be “fleeting” and “transitory” (Massey and Denton 1993).

A less optimistic analysis of residential segregation is offered by the place stratification model that emerges in more recent research. This model shifts the focus from socioeconomic status and acculturation levels to the role of racial prejudice and discrimination in housing markets, based largely on the experience of African Americans (Charles 2003). From this perspective, segregation reflects a set of racial biases that have historically fueled “white flight” as neighborhoods become racially integrated. Discriminatory lending on the part of banks, racial steering, redlining, and several other forms of institutional racism have further contributed to residential segregation in cities like Chicago,

New York, and Los Angeles. For Massey and Denton as well as others, racism of this sort generates racially homogenous “ghettos” that face a set of social and economic problems not typical of ethnic enclaves.

For most scholars, the segregation facing Latinos in metropolitan areas more closely reflects the dynamics emphasized by the spatial assimilation model than the place stratification perspective (Charles 2003). Massey and Denton (1993) perhaps most forcefully draw this distinction between the history of Hispanic enclaves and spatial assimilation and the history of black ghettos and residential segregation. First, they point to a broad set of statistical measures that indicate Hispanics are much less segregated from whites than are blacks, even in cities like Chicago and New York. More importantly, they claim that Latino enclaves, like earlier ethnic enclaves, should serve as “springboards for broader mobility in society” while residential segregation traps African Americans “behind an increasingly impermeable color line” (1993:33). Consistent with this claim, they provide compelling evidence that Latinos are more fully able to convert gains in socioeconomic status into spatial mobility. More specifically, they find that affluent Latinos are less segregated from whites than are middle-class Latinos, who in turn are less segregated than poor Hispanics. In contrast, African Americans remain highly segregated from whites regardless of social class. Los Angeles represents only one of the many cities Massey and Denton cite to illustrate these differences. In this city, which is home to the largest Latino barrio, “the poorest Hispanics were less segregated than the *most affluent* blacks” in 1980 as well as 1990 (Massey and Denton 1993; Massey and Fischer 1999).

The differences that distinguish Latino segregation from black segregation are presumably rooted in their distinct experiences with racial bias and housing discrimination. Many Latinos, according to this account, face limited housing options due to limited financial resources but do not face the discriminatory practices that restrict the housing options of even the most affluent blacks. Given this, Latinos are more readily able to use the economic resources they accumulate to rent apartments and buy homes in neighborhoods that at the same time exclude blacks. Similarly, Latinos are less likely to encounter the white hostility and white flight that blacks have routinely encountered as they move into predominantly white neighborhoods. These claims rest on a limited but important set of studies. On the one hand, research that examines attitudes towards residential integration consistently finds that whites indicate a much greater willingness to live in neighborhoods that include Hispanics than neighborhoods that include blacks. In fact, Emerson et al. (2001) find that the percentage of Hispanics does not significantly influence neighborhood preferences among whites, once we control for the effects

of other neighborhood characteristics like crime, property values, and the quality of public schools. In contrast, their willingness to buy homes in neighborhoods that include blacks declines as the percentage of blacks rises, even if other factors are held constant, consistent with a long line of studies that connect this antipathy to white flight from city to suburbs (see Charles 2003). On the other hand, several scholars find that Latino and black encounters with housing discrimination also differ, if less dramatically. Drawing from housing audits as well as lending audits, Yinger (1995) and others (Squires and O'Connor 2001) report that Hispanics are less likely to encounter racial steering in their transactions with realtors and less likely to be denied home loans.

According to this research, the differences that distinguish the dynamics of segregation for blacks and Latinos also result in dramatically distinct consequences. The "hypersegregation" that African Americans face necessarily gives rise to "hyperghettos" that are plagued with poverty rates ranging from 20% to 80%. High poverty rates are coupled with high unemployment, which generates many other problems for the neighborhoods in which blacks are concentrated, including the concentration of female-headed households, welfare dependence, high crime, school failure, and a cycle of disinvestment and decline (Wilson 1987). With few exceptions, these problems are much less common across the ethnic enclaves in which Hispanics reside (Massey and Mullan 1984).

Recent research, however, suggests that these analyses do not adequately capture the complexities of Latino segregation in the past two decades. One of the most interesting developments is the convergence of segregation levels for Latinos and blacks since the 1980s, as black segregation declined while Latino segregation held steady nationally (Charles 2003). This historical development is coupled with significant variation in Latino segregation across metro areas that differ in ways not fully articulated by spatial assimilation models. Frey and Farley (1996) find that Latino segregation was highest in "multiethnic" cities and predominantly white cities where Latinos but no other minorities were overrepresented. Similarly, Iceland (2004) as well as Frey and Farley (1996) find that Latino segregation increased where the Latino population grew most dramatically, while segregation declined in many other cities. In general, the growing complexity of Latino segregation highlighted by this research is tied to the most recent wave of immigration. Iceland and others speculate that high levels of Latino immigration increase segregation by fueling the growth of ethnic enclaves. The expansion of these enclaves may in part reflect the economic constraints and cultural barriers facing recently arrived Latinos who, according to some, are more disadvantaged than earlier cohorts (Borjas 1994). Alba et al. (2000), however, suggest that the rapid influx of Latino immigrants may set in motion a set of processes more consistent

with place stratification models than spatial assimilation models. More specifically, the dramatic increase in the size of the Latino population in recent decades could “heighten the social boundary between the majority and new groups, leading to greater discrimination against the latter” (Alba et al. 2000: 593), consistent with Blalock’s (1967) theory that the greater the size of the minority population, the greater the perceived threat. “Immigrant minorities would begin to resemble African Americans” (Alba et al. 2000: 593), facing greater segregation as their numbers rise (see also Wilson 1987).

Taken together, this work makes clear that many debates regarding the experiences of Latinos remain unresolved at the same time that it provides several important findings and questions guiding our analysis. Both the spatial assimilation model as well as the place stratification model may be relevant to the analysis of Latino segregation in the Heartland as well as more broadly. More specifically, the dramatic rise of the Latino population in the last decade may have transformed the dynamics of segregation to reflect an increasingly complex interplay between class and race. If so, we may see a convergence of segregation patterns for Latinos and African Americans given the significant influx of immigrants. Further, these dynamics may vary across cities and towns that differ in other theoretically important ways as well. By focusing on a region largely ignored in previous research, our analysis will clarify the complexities of Latino segregation across the United States.

Data and Methods

Our analysis draws from the U.S. Census, as well as several other data sources, to explore the dynamics of residential segregation and its consequences for Latinos in three midwestern cities: Omaha, Lincoln, and Lexington, NE. Each has become an important destination for Latinos in the last decade. At the same time, these cities differ in several important ways.

Omaha, the largest city in Nebraska, is home to the largest Latino population in the state. While this community has a long history, the last decade has witnessed unprecedented growth as the Hispanic population increased 143% from 16,371 to 39,735 (see Table 1A). Many Latinos have been drawn by jobs in the manufacturing sector, which historically has been more important in Omaha than elsewhere in Nebraska. In 2000, fully 28% of the Latino population was employed in this sector, many recruited to work in the city’s meat-packing plants (see Table 1B). As in other cities, construction, retail, and the growing healthcare industry have also become important, providing both the “blue collar” and service-sector jobs often reserved for Latinos.

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low-income families, rent represents the most costly basic need. Lexington does not seem to be an exception, as the savings that small-town living provides homeowners is not similarly available to renters. The median contract rent for the city is \$358. For Latino renters, the contract rent rises to \$364. Faced with these rents, making ends meet for those with low income remains difficult.

In Lexington as in Omaha, a “safety net” of sorts may be provided by the neighborhoods in which low-income Latinos are concentrated as well as by the broader set of institutions the Hispanic community has bolstered. However, the future of this safety net and the prosperity of the Latino community more generally may be more tenuous than is commonly recognized for two key reasons. On the one hand, meatpacking provides an important but limited number of job opportunities. This sector thus will be unable to fully absorb the next generation of Latino adults. On the other hand, the next generation also lacks one important form of social capital on which their white counterparts may draw to pursue other opportunities: namely, a network of educated parents and neighbors. As Table 4 indicates, educational attainment in those neighborhoods with the highest concentration of Latinos is much lower than in predominantly white neighborhoods. In fact, the majority of Latino adults living in Lexington lack a high school degree. The public schools that Latino children attend ideally could compensate for this disadvantage, arming students with the high school degrees that they need to pursue higher education or employment opportunities beyond the meatpacking industry. If these schools fail Latino children in Lexington, however, as have others across the nation, the prosperity of the Latino community may be more fleeting than secure.

Conclusions

As the Heartland becomes an increasingly important destination for Latinos, scholars must turn their attention to the cities and towns of the Great Plains to more fully understand the dynamics that shape the fate of Hispanics in the United States. This analysis of the segregation facing Latinos across Nebraska extends our understanding of these dynamics in several important ways. First, our analysis clarifies the diverse set of constraints and opportunities that Latinos encounter in their search for “the good life.” More specifically, we uncover the increasingly complex connections between class, race, and segregation that have emerged with the most recent wave of immigration. Both the larger cities and small towns of the Midwest provide important lessons about these complexities and the way that the dynamics of segregation differ and coincide across time and place.

Much like African Americans a generation ago, Latinos in Omaha and Lincoln have become increasingly segregated from whites as the *size* of the Hispanic population has increased. Consistent with most previous studies, this rising segregation reflects to some extent the set of processes emphasized by spatial assimilation models. In other words, the increase in segregation reflects in part the economic constraints facing the recent wave of Latino immigrants who in large part account for Hispanic population growth in these cities. Split labor markets that limit the job opportunities available to these new immigrants intersect with the economics of housing markets to concentrate many in the ethnic enclaves that have emerged in each city. Class factors also account to some extent for the spatial mobility many Latinos have secured. More specifically, homeownership has provided some degree of spatial mobility for Latinos, as have some gains in education and income.

As central as class factors are to these processes, our analysis also points to the limits of previous research that emphasizes spatial assimilation models to the exclusion of place stratification models in accounting for the segregation facing Latinos. With the most recent wave of immigration, several patterns have emerged that clearly point to the continuing significance of race/ethnicity for Hispanics, at least in some metro contexts. First, the relationship between income, education, and spatial mobility is not linear as earlier studies report. Second, Latinos of most SES groups are less segregated from other Latinos than they are from whites. Perhaps most importantly, the segregation facing Latinos in Lincoln and Omaha is in part the product of white flight. In both cities, the influx of Latinos to those neighborhoods that have become ethnic enclaves has spurred the exodus of whites just as did the arrival of African Americans to northern cities in the early 20th century. In neither case is white flight reducible to economics.

Lexington offers additional lessons less fully anticipated in previous research and perhaps more interesting. On the one hand, this case suggests that new models for building integrated communities lie in “micropolitan areas” like this one: small towns that offer Latino immigrants a set of job opportunities that provide incomes similar to those of white residents and make homeownership across a broad spectrum of neighborhoods possible. On the other hand, this case also suggests that the promise of integration afforded by these circumstances may be undermined by the same fears that have fueled white flight in urban areas. In short, Lexington makes clear that white flight represents a response to integration that cuts across rural and urban America. The flight from city to suburb evident in cities across the country since the 1950s may be repeated in towns like Lexington, albeit taking on a perhaps new form as Anglos move

from town to acreages and lakefront properties that literally lie in the “middle of nowhere.”

Though problematic in many ways, the consequences of segregation for Latinos in Nebraska are perhaps more mixed than we initially anticipated. In Omaha and Lexington, in particular, meatpacking jobs have provided the income that buffers predominantly Latino neighborhoods from the economic costs of segregation evident in predominantly black neighborhoods. Further, the concentration of a “critical mass” of steadily employed Latinos in both cities has provided the foundation for a thriving Hispanic business community as well as churches and other cultural institutions. This may in turn contribute further to the concentration of Latinos in these ethnic enclaves through a process we were unable to tap; specifically, some if not many Latinos who may have the financial resources to rent and buy housing in other neighborhoods may choose to live in ethnic enclaves because they want to remain connected to the cultural, political, and social life of this community. Those who have emerged as leaders within the Hispanic community in particular are likely to remain in ethnic enclaves. This possibility may explain why the most highly educated and affluent Latinos remain so segregated from whites in Lincoln, Omaha, and Lexington.

Notwithstanding the economic and cultural vitality of Latino neighborhoods in these cities, segregation could result in at least two serious problems in the future. First, our analysis suggests that segregation may undermine the educational attainment and economic security of the next generation, to the extent that the Latino neighborhoods that have emerged with the most recent wave of immigration lack the social capital on which academic achievement and school success increasingly depend. Public schools could compensate for this lack of social capital but few historically have done so, as the high dropout rates among second-generation Latinos indicate. If this generation fails to attain more education than their parents, poverty will likely become more common than the upward mobility secured by earlier generations of immigrants—and a phenomenon that Portes and Zhou (1993) refer to as “segmented assimilation” will become more common than spatial assimilation.

Segregation, particularly if coupled with economic decline, can also result in a phenomenon that Martha Menchaca (1995) refers to as “social apartness,” fueling the perception and treatment of Latinos as “other.” That Lexington is widely referred to pejoratively as “Mexington” is but one indication of this social apartness. If we are to more fully understand the exclusionary practices and logic facing Latinos across the nation, more careful analysis of the many forms of apartness that persist alongside spatial segregation as well as integration is necessary.

For Latinos as for others, segregation does indeed have many faces, bringing a complex mix of opportunities and costs that increasingly play out across

the cities and towns of the Great Plains. By shifting our focus to new centers of Latino population growth, we gain a deeper understanding of an American dilemma that remains among our most pressing challenges in the 21st century.

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Notes

1. We use the term "white" and non-Hispanic whites interchangeably throughout the text, following a convention in the literature on residential segregation. It is important to acknowledge, however, that most Latinos counted by the census are white.
2. Four key websites report dissimilarity indices for all metro areas as well as some places and counties. These include the U.S. Census (www.census.gov), the Lewis Mumford Center (www.albany.edu/mumford), Censusscope (www.censusscope.org), and the University of Michigan Population Studies Center (<http://enceladus.icpsr.umich.edu/race/racestart.asp>).

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