Cohort and Age Effects in Racial Residential Segregation in U.S. Cities

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Extended Abstract (534 words)

Black-white segregation in the United States has been slowly but unevenly diminishing since the 1960s. Recent studies have attributed the decline in residential segregation variously to bans on discrimination in the Fair Housing Act of 1968, changes in whites' attitudes towards co-location with blacks, socioeconomic gains for blacks, and construction of new neighborhoods free of old patterns of segregation (Charles 2006, Crowder and South 2005). However, recent studies seldom consider the ramifications of an obvious point: segregation levels do not change unless people move. Yet people move at varying rates, depending on their ages and stage in the life course (Rossi 1980 [1955]). To the extent that blacks and whites have settled down, perhaps bought homes, and are aging in place, they will not be contributing to a reduction in segregation levels.

Older segregation studies have documented how the life-cycle events of marriage and childbearing that encourage mobility also spurred blacks to seek out the amenities of largely white neighborhoods (Edwards 1971, Taeuber and Taeuber 1965). But recent research has shifted away from such aggregate-level studies of segregation to individual-level studies examining what helps to explain movement into and out of poor minority neighborhoods (Crowder and South 2005; South, Crowder, and Chavez 2005). Returning to that older tradition, the present study will show that declines in black-white segregation levels are strongest among young and middle-aged people, with period declines somewhat outstripping change within cohorts. This is an important contribution to the segregation debate, because different analysts

have interpreted the change in segregation as a whole as either remarkably fast or glacially slow, and this study can shed light on the composition of that change.

To address our research question --- how does residential segregation differ by age-group --- we review literature from past mobility and segregation studies and test competing hypotheses about the relationship between age and segregation. Our data are drawn from the Summary Tape File 1 of the 1990 and 2000 US Censuses. As we discussed above, our unit of analysis is the census tract. We calculate an age-specific Theil's index, a measure of dissimilarity, for all US Metropolitan Areas where the black population share exceeded 9% in 1990.

Our findings show that as blacks age in U.S. cities they can expect to experience decreased segregation from their white counterparts. On average, segregation levels had already largely stabilized for younger and middle-age blacks by 1990 as the decline in segregation between 1990 and 2000 was sharpest for older blacks. While a few cities in our study experienced increased segregation for the youngest cohort, those cohort effects are relatively small (average is less than 2%) and were concentrated in historically hypersegregated cities (i.e. Detroit).

Consistent with our expectations, period effects outweighed the cohort effects of racial segregation. However, cohort effects were substantial in some cities, which suggests a complimentary effect of fewer people aging in segregated neighborhoods coupled with increased mobility across the life course. Our results shed light on whether decreasing metropolitan segregation has been a rapid or sluggish phenomenon. Because segregation is decreasing by both period and cohort estimates, desegregation is occurring at a fairly rapid rate between the last two census years.