

Occupational Gender Segregation and the Earnings Gap: Changes in the 1980s

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The 1980 and 1990 U.S. Census data confirm the decline in the earnings gap between men and women. Occupational segregation by gender also declined during the 1980s. Cross-sectional decompositions show that 15% of the earnings gap would be eliminated if women's occupation distributions were the same as men's. Over-time decompositions show that declining occupational segregation accounted for about 36% of the decline in the earnings gap; most of the declining earnings gap resulted from more equal pay within occupations. © 1995 Academic Press, Inc.

The ratio of female to male earnings has been improving by about one percentage point per year since the mid 1970s (O'Neill and Polachek, 1993); by 1989, women working full time year-round earned 66% of what men earned. Occupational gender segregation also began to decline in the 1970s after having remained constant for most of the 20th century (Jacobs, 1989). By 1990, 52% percent of men or women would have had to change occupations in order to eliminate occupational segregation (Cotter, DeFiore, Hermsen, Kowalewski, and Vanneman, 1995); in 1970 this had been 68% (Bianchi and Rytina, 1986).

It seems reasonable that some of the 1980s decline in the earnings gap might be traced to the decline in occupational segregation. It is often asserted that one of the major reasons for persistent gender inequality in earnings is that women are segregated into occupations that are poorly remunerated (Blau and Ferber, 1992;

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Hartmann, 1976; Reskin and Padavic, 1994; Sorensen, 1990; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1995). Most past studies of the relationship between occupational segregation and the gender earnings gap have been cross-sectional; the simultaneous declines during the 1980s provide the opportunity to test whether *changes* in the two are related. In this paper, we examine 1980 and 1990 census data that confirm declines in both occupational gender segregation and the earnings gap. We find that over one-third of the decline in the earnings gap is associated with occupational desegregation; about two-thirds of the declining earnings inequality occurs within occupations.

THE ASSOCIATION OF OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION AND THE EARNINGS GAP

Previous cross-sectional research into the relationship between the earnings gap and occupational segregation cautions us that the declines in the two inequalities may not be as closely related as is often thought. Various studies have calculated that between 8 and 43% of the wage gap is associated with occupational gender segregation (see England, 1992; Sorensen, 1990). The most frequently cited statistic is based on Treiman and Hartmann's (1981) analysis of 1970 census tables; they calculate that 35% of the gender wage gap would be eliminated if women had the same occupational distribution as men but retained their average earnings within each occupation. Even with this relatively high estimate, more of the gap results from the fact that women are paid less in the same occupations as men than from the fact they are segregated into female-dominated occupations. Moreover, Goldin (1990) has claimed that some unspecified "correction" reduces this number to 19% (see also Polachek, 1987).

Treiman and Hartmann's and Goldin's are the only cross-sectional studies that employ a direct decomposition to calculate the size of the gender segregation effect. The more common method, suitable for smaller samples, is to include the gender composition of the occupation in a standard earnings function; men's and women's earnings are regressed on a linear variable measuring the female share of the occupation (see, for example, Sorensen, 1990; O'Neill and Polachek, 1993; and England, Farkas, Kilbourne, and Dou, 1988).

The only decomposition of *changes* in the earnings gap by *changes* in gender segregation is Goldin's (1987) comparison of six major occupational categories from the 1890, 1930, and 1970 censuses. Changes in women's occupational distributions account for 17% of the decline in the earnings gap (Goldin, 1987, p. 157).

RECENT CHANGES IN THE EARNINGS GAP AND OCCUPATIONAL SEGREGATION

Gender earnings ratios show a steady upward trend beginning in the early 1970s following a long period of little change (Bianchi, 1995). Among full-time year-round workers, women's annual earnings in 1974 were 50% of men's

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