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The persistence of white flight in middle-class suburbia

Samuel H. Kye

Indiana University, Department of Sociology, Ballantine Hall 744, 1020 E. Kirkwood Avenue, Bloomington, IN 47404, United States

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have continued to debate the extent to which white flight remains racially motivated or, in contrast, the result of socioeconomic concerns that proxy locations of minority residence. Using 1990–2010 census data, this study contributes to this debate by re-examining white flight in a sample of both poor and middle-class suburban neighborhoods. Findings fail to provide evidence in support of the racial proxy hypothesis. To the contrary, for neighborhoods with a larger non-white presence, white flight is instead *more* likely in middle-class as opposed to poorer neighborhoods. These results not only confirm the continued salience of race for white flight, but also suggest that racial white flight may be motivated to an even greater extent in middle-class, suburban neighborhoods. Theoretically, these findings point to the decoupling of economic and racial residential integration, as white flight may persist for groups even despite higher levels of socioeconomic attainment.

1. Introduction

As U.S. cities and neighborhoods continue to grow in diversity, residential assimilation remains one of the most important barometers of societal incorporation for minority residents. Indeed, few literature are as well-developed as the rich tradition of works identifying the factors that facilitate residential integration and segregation (Alba et al., 1999; Alba and Logan, 1991; Charles, 2003; Logan et al., 1996; Massey, 1985). Likewise, a deep research tradition on white flight has attested to the persistence of white population exodus in shaping the racial composition of America's metropolitan areas (Crowder et al., 2011; Crowder and South, 2008). In short, the *racial white flight hypothesis* continues to recognize whites' racially motivated preferences against, and departure from, integrated neighborhoods as one of the key mechanisms responsible for the reproduction of a segregated metropolis.

However, a truly robust assessment of the racial white flight hypothesis has been made difficult due to the historically disadvantaged neighborhood contexts that characterize locations of minority residence. As a result, what scholars ascribe as racialized patterns of white flight may in fact be confounded by non-racial factors related to neighborhood quality and desirability. Adopting this view, several scholars have disputed the extent to which racial factors actually motivate the mobility behavior of white households. According to the *racial proxy hypothesis*, all residents—including whites—act on preferences to avoid neighborhoods with high levels of instability and poverty (Ellen, 2000; Krysan, 2002). Thus, while white flight may reproduce racial residential segregation, this outcome emerges as a collateral consequence of white exodus that is primarily motivated by socioeconomic, rather than racial concerns. In this regard, white flight remains complicit in residential segregation *only* to the extent that minority neighborhoods possess high levels of disadvantage that otherwise prevent the integration of white and non-white residents (Harris, 1999, 2001).

Yet today, the movement of non-white groups into middle-class suburban neighborhoods has significantly attenuated the inequalities in neighborhood quality traditionally found between white and non-white households (Farrell and Firebaugh, 2016;

E-mail address: skye@indiana.edu.

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Friedman et al., 2014). Indeed, minority suburbanization has represented a powerful force beginning to erode the socioeconomic disparities long driven by the disproportionate concentration of minorities in poor urban neighborhoods (Wilson, 1987; Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2013). For researchers, these recent demographic trends provide the opportunity to examine the mobility behavior of white residents in middle-class suburban neighborhoods that remain less vulnerable to the confounding effects of disadvantaged neighborhood contexts that might otherwise explain white flight.

To this end, after demonstrating the utility and salience of recent minority suburbanization trends, this paper asks: to what extent, if any, does white flight continue to persist in *middle-class* suburban neighborhoods? In so doing, this paper provides three contributions to the existing literature. First, by using an aggregate sample of suburban neighborhoods from the largest U.S. metropolitan areas, I provide an updated assessment of white flight trends to a literature that, to this point, has largely focused on simulated experiments and/or white flight from urban neighborhoods. Second, by explicitly examining *middle-class* suburban neighborhoods, this analysis focuses on neighborhoods that untangle the historical overlap between minority residence and poverty. As a result, findings provide a more accurate assessment of the degree to which middle-class socioeconomic contexts mitigate white flight or, in contrast, the presence and growth of minorities continues to independently motivate white flight in America's suburban areas. Finally, by comparing patterns of white flight driven by black as well as Hispanic and Asian groups, this study remains relevant in light of modern streams of migration while also addressing ongoing debates about the changing nature of America's contemporary color line.

Results indicate that contrary to predictions of the racial proxy hypothesis, race continues to significantly predict white flight. However, these results also suggest an even stronger variant of the racial white flight hypothesis, where racial white flight is *more likely* in middle-class neighborhoods net of socioeconomic characteristics and all other ecological controls. For immigrant groups in particular, results confirm that this is due to the increasingly higher probability of white flight with the greater presence of Hispanic and Asian residents. Ultimately, these findings both complement and challenge current theory on race, white flight, and residential assimilation. I conclude by discussing the importance of these results for policymakers and how this study should inform future white flight research.

2. Background

2.1. The white flight thesis: current approaches, findings, and limitations

While not often discussed in tandem, theoretical perspectives for white flight have strong implications for the broader literature on residential assimilation. Substantively, white flight remains a key mechanism in the reproduction of residential segregation, the most common outcome examined by residential assimilation research (Friedman et al., 2013; Iceland and Nelson, 2008; Iceland and Scopilliti, 2008; Parisi et al., 2011). Rooted in the same ecological tradition, the “white flight thesis”—the aversion and departure of white residents of/from racially-integrated neighborhoods—has been most commonly attributed to the works of Duncan and Duncan (1957) and Taeuber and Taeuber (1965), who found that the entry of black residents began a clear and consistent pattern of white out-mobility. Drawing upon census data, subsequent studies have both validated these projections and expanded the thesis to immigrant groups, consistently finding that the share of a neighborhood's whites declines disproportionately with the growth of minority and immigrant populations (Guest and Zuiches, 1971; Lee and Wood, 1991).

A second major source of evidence for the white flight thesis has been found in studies of residential attitudes, which demonstrate the powerful role of race in whites' neighborhood preferences. For example, using flash cards of varying percentages of black, Hispanic, or Asian residents, Bobo and Zubrinsky (1996) find that whites were significantly less willing to buy homes in neighborhoods with increases in the percentage of minority residents (also see Charles, 2003). Much of this resistance appears to stem from racial stereotypes, as whites consistently express exaggerated views of disorder and crime in integrated neighborhoods (Billingham and Hunt, 2016; Quillian and Pager, 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush, 2004). White residents in neighborhoods with quickly growing immigrant populations may also invoke stereotypes when expressing concerns about changes to neighborhood “culture”, often subtle code for more specific resistance to ethnic grocers, bilingual programs, and other visible characteristics of demographic change (Everitt and Levinson, 2014; Flores, 2014; Jiménez and Horowitz, 2013).

Finally, recent evidence for the white flight thesis has come from researchers utilizing methods geocoding individual-level data (most commonly the Panel Study of Income Dynamics), thus providing direct evidence on the individual level preferences of white residents. Crowder (2000) merges census data with the 1979 to 1985 waves of the PSID to predict the effect of minority population growth on the likelihood of individual whites moving to different neighborhoods, finding that a local neighborhood's racial composition is a strong and significant predictor of white respondent relocation. Likewise, Crowder et al. (2011) also use geo-referenced PSID data to show that native householders are significantly more likely to move to different census tracts with the growth of immigrant populations in local and nearby neighborhoods. In short, research examining whites' mobility decisions tends to reach the same conclusions: net of all individual controls, the growth of non-whites significantly predicts the odds of relocation/exodus.

Yet despite this impressive body of research, several researchers have questioned the degree to which “white flight” remains racially-motivated in nature. This counterargument, known as the *racial proxy hypothesis*, suggests that the departure of white residents may, in fact, be indicative of neighborhood life cycle and housing characteristics that motivate moving in general (Ellen, 2000). Like all groups—including black residents—whites prefer to live in quality neighborhoods generally void of social ills (Harris, 2001). Accordingly, apparent instances of racial “white flight” might instead reflect more general aversions to living in neighborhoods with poor residents, unstable populations, and other undesirable socioeconomic contexts. Supporting this view, early research on white flight has shown white population loss to be strongly associated with the socioeconomic decline of neighborhoods (Frey,

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