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ABSTRACT

Residential landscapes across the United States have been significantly altered in recent years by the increased racial and ethnic diversity evident within urban areas. In New Orleans, Louisiana, residential landscapes were particularly impacted by the disruptive influences associated with Hurricane Katrina, a storm that ultimately transformed the demographic make-up of this urban area. This research investigates the impacts that increased diversity has had on the levels of residential segregation among racial and/or ethnic groups in New Orleans from 2000 to 2010. Empirical analysis entailed the measurement of two dimensions of segregation evident among Non-Hispanic whites, African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians. Measures of residential exposure were decomposed in order to investigate the relative impacts of metropolitan-wide compositional change and intra-urban redistributive change on segregation among the four groups. During the 2000s, New Orleans exhibited very modest forms of residential integration. Results suggest that Non-Hispanic whites, Asians, and Hispanics exhibited some degree of “ethnic (or racial) self-selectivity” that functioned to concentrate these groups residentially, although these forces were partially overwhelmed by other forces operating at both the neighborhood and metropolitan scales. The evidence further suggests that the residential experiences among minorities were strongly impacted by the redistributive behavior of whites.

Keywords: Diversity, Ethnicity, New Orleans, Post-Hurricane Katrina, Race, Residential Segregation

INTRODUCTION

Irrespective of civil rights advances or the passage of fair housing laws, neighborhood-level segregation among racial and ethnic groups remains a consistently evident trait across the urban United States. The literature focused on either measuring levels of residential segregation, or on discussing the causes and/or implications of this phenomenon, has generally utilized a bi-racial approach. Given the historically
high levels of residential separation between African-Americans and whites, this particular focus has been somewhat justified. However, due to continued immigration the last few decades, the “chocolate city, vanilla suburbs” phenomena has ceased to apply to most large urban areas (Farley et al., 1978, 1994; Strait, 2006; Strait & Gong, 2008, 2010). In short, the increased diversity evident across the urban U.S. has largely made a bi-racial approach to residential segregation irrelevant. Consequently, urban scholars have recently begun to expand the focus on segregation to include the residential experiences of other racial and/or ethnic groups. The perpetual roles that neighborhood dynamics play in terms of fostering and reflecting social relations among urban populations make it imperative to understand the impacts that this increased diversity has on contemporary residential landscapes.

Traditionally, no region in the U.S. has been more disproportionately viewed with a bi-racial lens than the U.S. South. Yet in recent years, the South has mirrored trends evident nation-wide, as an influx of immigrants has significantly influenced urban residential patterns across the region. New Orleans, Louisiana represents one southern urban area that has witnessed considerable ethnic change during the course of the last decade. However, unlike the Sunbelt’s burgeoning multi-ethnic centers, such as Houston, Atlanta and Miami, New Orleans has not functioned as a traditional immigrant “magnet.” Rather than being a response to a booming local economy, changes in both the residential and ethnic geographies of the New Orleans urban region reflect a direct response to the transformative effects of Hurricane Katrina. Beyond the immediate devastation it had on the city’s physical landscape and infrastructure, the 2005 hurricane also significantly influenced the public discourse in regards to urban social relations. For instance, in the wake of the storm, the consequences of racial and ethnic disparities within New Orleans, and across the entire nation, were brought into stark relief. In fact, the swiftness to which New Orleans collapsed into social anarchy after the storm led many commentators to refer to Katrina as a socially induced tragedy that exposed America’s racial legacy, rather than simply a “natural” disaster (Dixon, 2005).

One of the more significant impacts that Katrina has had on racial discourse pertains to the role it played in reinserting the importance of residential segregation onto the national radar. For example, media images in the aftermath of the storm vividly documented the disproportionate impacts it had on highly segregated neighborhoods in low lying areas of the city, such as the Lower Ninth Ward. Moreover, the storm and its immediate aftermath were followed by recovery efforts that witnessed both an influx of Hispanic workers and the rapid rates-of-return among Asian and white residents, relative to African-Americans (Fussell, 2007). The sum of these two processes generated heated debates concerning the implications of a post-Katrina New Orleans that was destined to be less black and perhaps more integrated. By focusing on the evolution of residential segregation within New Orleans during the most recent decade, this research explores the residential influences of racial and ethnic change on the post-Katrina landscape. Given that the nature of the storms impacts varied considerably by race, ethnicity, and class, this research should provide insights into the complex human geographies associated with “natural” disasters.

This paper investigates changes in the levels of segregation exhibited from 2000 to 2010 among four major racial and/or ethnic groups in the New Orleans metropolitan area: whites, African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians. This project builds upon earlier research that analyzed the residential dynamics of segregation in New Orleans during the course of the 1990s (Strait, Gong, & Williams, 2007) by addressing the following specific questions: (1) What are the relative levels of segregation experienced among these four groups in New Orleans and how have they changed over time? (2) What forces are driving the changes in segregation exhibited among the four groups? (3) How did the impacts of these forces on segregation vary by race and ethnicity? The specific time-frame
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