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Race and Residence: Prospects for Stable Neighborhood Integration

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with Sandra Padilla

Over the past several decades, neighborhoods in U.S. metropolitan areas have undergone considerable racial and ethnic change. The last 10 years in particular have witnessed dramatic increases in black, Hispanic, and Asian populations in city and suburban neighborhoods throughout the country. This brief focuses on one dimension of our growing diversity—shifts in the black-white composition of neighborhoods in large metropolitan areas nationwide. Other research has shown that the neighborhoods in which we live are gradually becoming less segregated along black-white lines. But less is known about how this process is occurring. As such, two questions emerge. First, are all neighborhoods becoming more integrated, regardless of their initial racial composition? Second, are racially mixed neighborhoods stable, or do they inevitably become increasingly segregated once they reach a certain critical threshold of black representation?

To address these questions, we analyzed changes from 1990 to 2000 in the racial composition of neighborhoods in the 100 largest metropolitan areas.¹ Because our specific focus is on black-white differences, we omit from the analysis those metropolitan areas among the 100 largest where blacks are not the dominant minority or where Hispanics (the next largest

minority group nationwide) constitute more than 20 percent of the metropolitan area's population.² This leaves 69 large metropolitan areas with 25,134 neighborhoods. Using the Neighborhood Change Database, we are able to track changes in the black-white composition of neighborhoods over the 1990s, and analyze how much the starting composition of a neighborhood influenced its trajectory.³

The findings from this analysis offer grounds for cautious optimism about the prospects for stable black-white integration in city and suburban neighborhoods. Specifically,

- The number of neighborhoods that exclude blacks altogether is shrinking, with black representation rising in a substantial share of neighborhoods that were exclusively white at the start of the 1990s.
- Racially mixed neighborhoods do not *inevitably* become more predominantly black over time; many neighborhoods that were racially mixed in 1990 stayed essentially the same over the course of the decade.
- This basic pattern applies to both suburban and city neighborhoods, and is not affected by the size of a metropolitan area's black population. In fact, racially mixed suburban neighborhoods were

More neighborhoods in metropolitan America are shared by blacks and whites today than a decade ago, but achieving widespread stable racial integration remains a challenge.

more likely to remain the same during the 1990s than those in central cities.

- However, relatively few neighborhoods that were predominantly or exclusively black at the start of the decade gained white population, and majority black neighborhoods were considerably more likely than majority white neighborhoods to gain black population.

Thus, more neighborhoods in metropolitan America are shared by blacks and whites today than a decade ago, and many racially integrated neighborhoods appear reasonably stable. The assumption that once a neighborhood becomes racially mixed it will inevitably “tip,” becoming more and more predominantly black, is not supported by the evidence of the 1990s. Nonetheless, many neighborhoods remain either exclusively white or exclusively black, and neighborhoods where blacks are in the majority are more likely to gain black population than to become more racially integrated. These findings indicate that, despite considerable progress, achieving and sustaining widespread stable racial integration remains an unmet challenge.

Trends in the Black-White Composition of Metropolitan Neighborhoods

This analysis classifies neighborhoods into five categories, based on their black-white composition:⁴

- Less than 5 percent black population—*exclusively white*;
- 5 to 10 percent black population—*predominantly white*;
- 10 to 50 percent black population—*mixed-majority white*;
- 50 to 90 percent black population—*mixed-majority black*; and

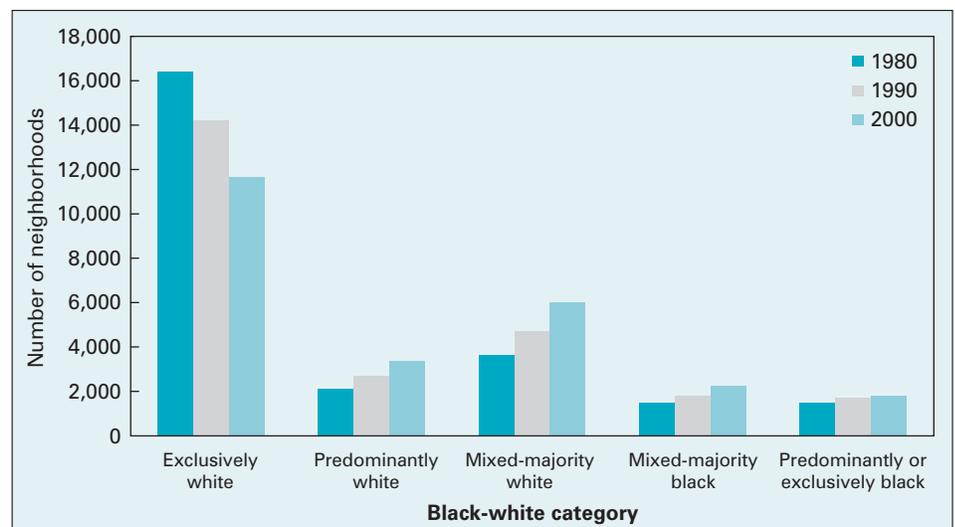
- More than 90 percent black population—*predominantly or exclusively black*.

As of 2000, most of the neighborhoods in our sample of large black-white metropolitan areas were relatively homogenous, with the majority (60 percent) *predominantly or exclusively white* and another 7 percent *predominantly or exclusively black*. Only one-third of neighborhoods are in the two categories we refer to as mixed, with 24 percent of total neighborhoods classified as *mixed-majority white* and 9 percent as *mixed-majority black*. However, over the last two decades, the share of neighborhoods that were *exclusively white* dropped steadily—from 65 percent in 1980 to 56 percent in 1990 and 47 percent in 2000—although these neighborhoods still far outnumber all other categories (see figure 1). The share of tracts in all the other categories grew over this period, with the biggest percentage point increases occurring in the *mixed-majority white* group (10 to 50 percent black). Both the number and percent of tracts in the *predominantly or exclusively black* category

grew only slightly—from 6.7 percent of all tracts in 1980 to 7.3 percent in 2000.

This overall pattern—the *exclusively white* category shrinking while all the categories with some black representation are growing—has been interpreted by some observers as showing that racial change always results in neighborhoods becoming blacker. But in fact, the overall shift toward rising black representation does not tell us enough about how neighborhoods in different categories may have changed. For *exclusively white* neighborhoods, of course, any shift to another category is, by definition, in the direction of becoming blacker. In the same way, any shift out of the *predominantly or exclusively black* category must be in the direction of becoming whiter. But neighborhoods in the other three categories could transition in either direction. The only way to trace the dynamic process of racial change is by tracking the experiences of specific types of neighborhoods over time. The remainder of this brief does exactly that, and finds change occurring in both directions.

FIGURE 1. Neighborhoods by Black-White Composition, 1980, 1990, 2000



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

Neighborhood Racial Transitions during the 1990s

Over three-quarters (77 percent) of the neighborhoods in our sample of large, black-white metropolitan areas fell into the same compositional category in 2000 as in 1990. And among the 23 percent that shifted from one category to another, 89 percent became blacker, while 11 percent became whiter. Thus, the overall picture is one of considerable racial stability, with transitions occurring among a relatively small share of neighborhoods and moving in both directions along the black-white continuum.

These transitions are illustrated in figure 2, where each horizontal bar represents the tracts in a given black-white category in 1990, and the subdivisions within each bar show the distribution of these tracts across categories in 2000. More specifically, among the neighborhoods that were *exclusively white* in 1990, 81 percent remained so in 2000, while 15 percent shifted into the *predominantly white* category and 4.7 percent became *mixed-majority white*. Even though only 19 percent of these *exclusively white* neighborhoods shifted racial

categories, because this category constituted over half of all the neighborhoods in 1990, the number of neighborhoods that experienced transitions was actually quite substantial—representing a major trend toward neighborhood integration.

Neighborhoods that were *predominantly white* in 1990 turned out to experience the most change among all of our categories, with only 41 percent remaining in the same category in 2000. More than half (52 percent) of these neighborhoods became blacker (more racially integrated), while the remaining 7 percent became whiter. In both *mixed* categories, about 80 percent of neighborhoods remained stable between 1990 and 2000. Of the roughly 20 percent of *mixed-majority white* neighborhoods that changed categories, most became blacker (more integrated). In the *mixed-majority black* category, a majority of the neighborhoods that changed also became blacker (less integrated). In both categories, however, small proportions of neighborhoods became whiter. Finally, over 90 percent of neighborhoods that were *predominantly or exclusively black*

in 1990 remained in that category in 2000. The remainder became whiter (more integrated).

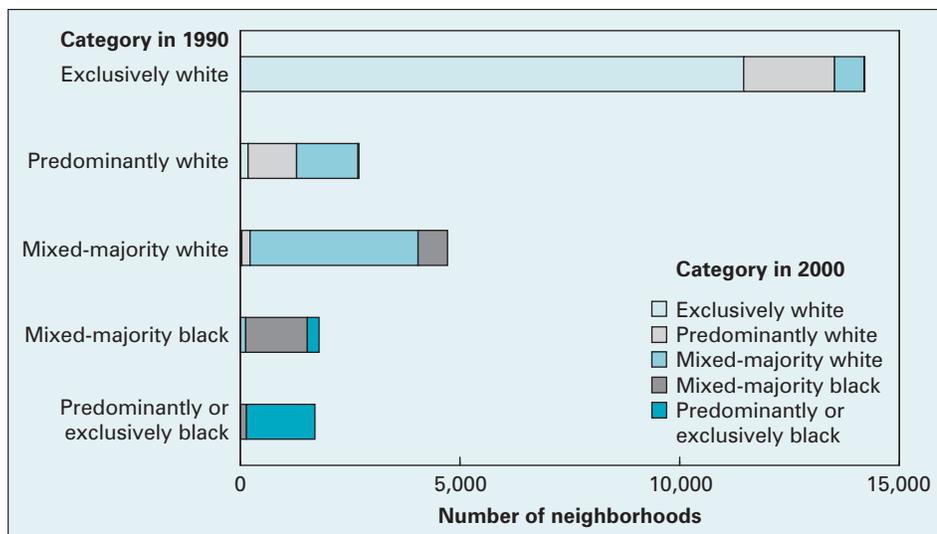
The two categories of neighborhoods that we have labeled *mixed-majority white* and *mixed-majority black* are often highlighted in research focused on racial change and tipping. Together these two categories account for only 33 percent of the neighborhoods included in our analysis—with twice as many in the mixed-majority white category as in the mixed-majority black category. Because these two categories are so wide (ranging from 10 percent black to 90 percent black), considerable racial transition may have occurred within them during the 1990s. In other words, these mixed neighborhoods may in fact be less stable than figure 2 suggests. Therefore, the remainder of this section zooms in to focus on changes in neighborhood racial composition that may be occurring at smaller intervals among mixed neighborhoods.

Mixed-Majority White Neighborhoods

Figure 3 divides the *mixed-majority white* category into four subgroups and shows how the tracts that fell into each of these subgroups in 1990 had changed by 2000. In general, the lower the initial percent black, the more stable these neighborhoods tend to be over the decade. For example, among tracts that were 10 to 20 percent black in 1990, 45 percent remained in the same range in 2000. Of tracts that were initially 20 to 30 percent black, 30 to 40 percent black, and 40 to 50 percent black, the shares remaining in the same subgroup in 2000 were 37 percent, 28 percent, and 27 percent, respectively.

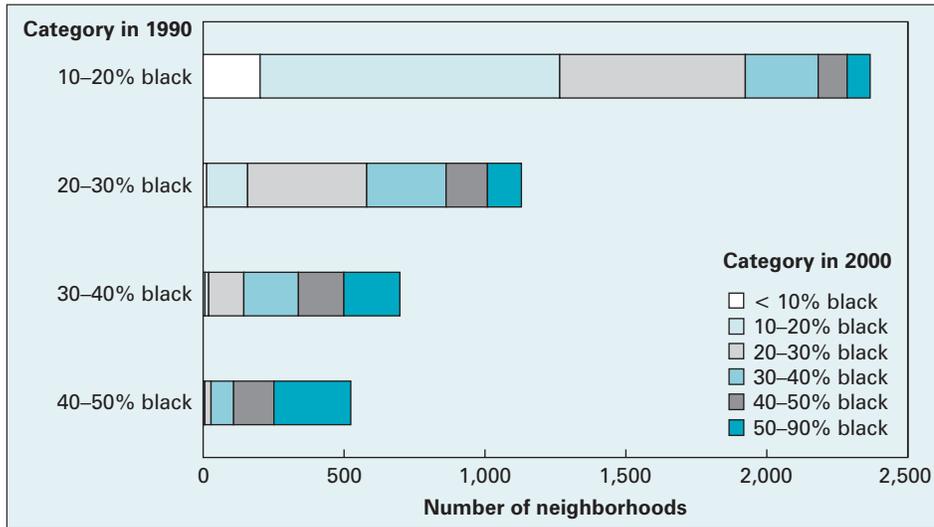
Tracts in all *mixed-majority white* subgroups were more likely to

FIGURE 2. Change in Black-White Neighborhood Composition from 1990 to 2000



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

FIGURE 3. Change in Black-White Neighborhood Composition from 1990 to 2000, Mixed-Majority White Neighborhoods



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

become blacker than to become whiter over the course of the 1990s. But a substantial share of tracts in each subgroup shifted to whiter categories. Interestingly, the share of neighborhoods becoming whiter was highest among neighborhoods that had the largest shares of black population at the start of the decade. Of neighborhoods initially in the 10 to 20 percent black category, 46 percent became blacker while only 10 percent became whiter. Of those initially in the 20 to 30 percent black subgroup of mixed-majority white neighborhoods, 46 percent became blacker and 16 percent became whiter. For those initially in the 30 to 40 percent black subgroup, the proportions were 60 percent blacker and 27 percent whiter. And for the subgroup of neighborhoods that was initially the blackest (40 to 50 percent black in 1990), 50 percent became blacker and 21 percent whiter. This evidence goes against the conventional “tipping” hypothesis. In each of the four subgroups within the mixed-majority white category, roughly half the neighborhoods either remained the same or became whiter.

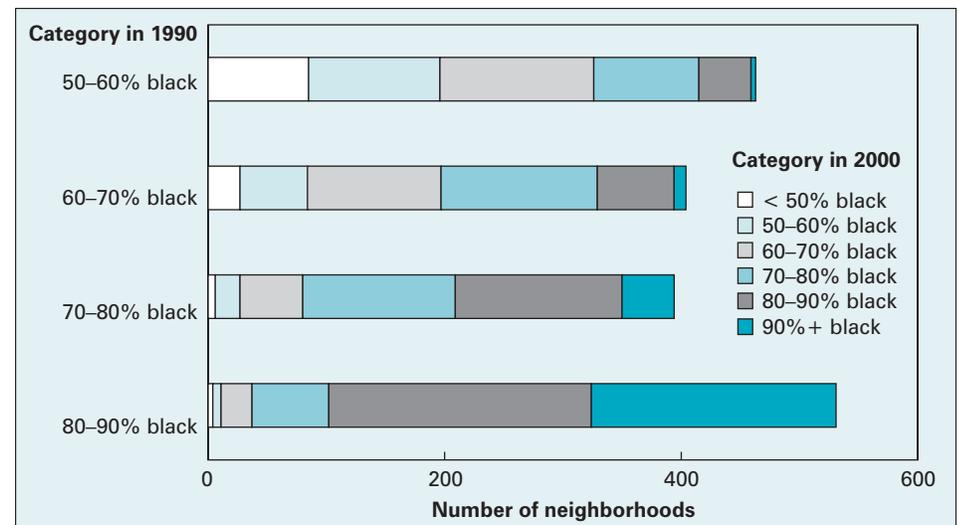
Mixed-Majority Black Neighborhoods

Figure 4 presents the same analysis for neighborhoods that were 50 to 90 percent black in 1990. These mixed-majority black neighborhoods were considerably less racially stable over the 1990s than mixed-majority white neighborhoods. Neighborhoods were most likely to shift from one subgroup to another if their initial com-

position of blacks was lower. For neighborhoods that were 50 to 60 percent black in 1990, for example, only 24 percent remained in the same subgroup in 2000. However, even in the most stable subgroup—neighborhoods that were 80 to 90 percent black in 1990—only 42 percent were in the same category in 2000.

For all mixed-majority black subgroups, the neighborhoods that changed were more likely to become blacker than whiter. However, the likelihood of becoming blacker was smaller for neighborhoods that began the decade with larger black shares. For the neighborhoods that were initially 50 to 60 percent black, for example, 58 percent became blacker and 18 percent became whiter. For the 60 to 70 percent and 70 to 80 percent black subgroups, around 50 percent of neighborhoods became blacker and around 20 percent whiter. For the blackest category in 1990, 39 percent became blacker and 21 percent whiter. Nevertheless, the overall pattern of movement among neighborhoods that were mixed-majority black in 1990 also runs counter to the standard “tipping” hypothesis. In every subgroup, at

FIGURE 4. Change in Black-White Composition from 1990 to 2000, Mixed-Majority Black Neighborhoods



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

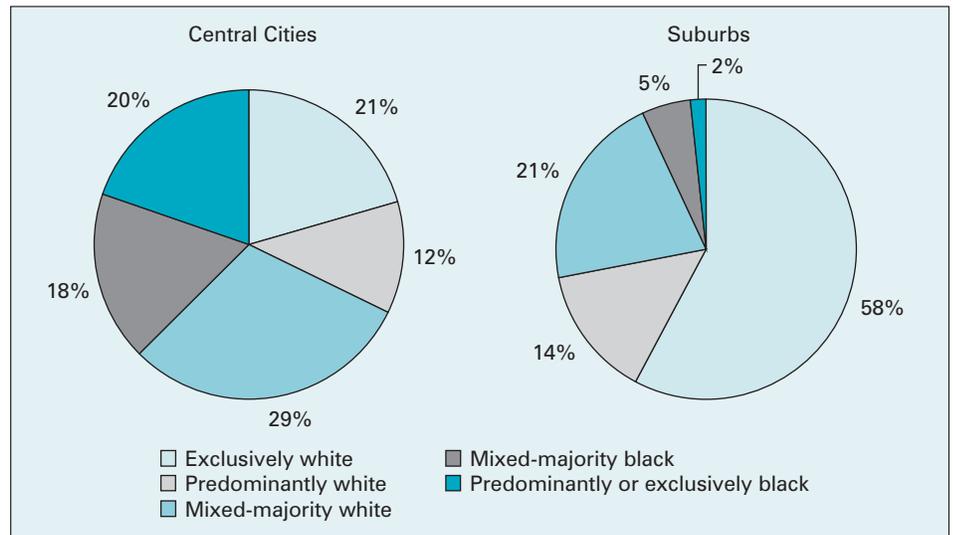
least one of every five neighborhoods became whiter over the decade, and approximately half became blacker.

Patterns of Racial Change in City and Suburban Neighborhoods

The racial composition of neighborhoods in central cities is very different from that of the suburbs of large metropolitan areas (figure 5). Historically, far fewer blacks have lived in the suburbs than in the cities, and central cities are still considerably blacker than the suburbs surrounding them. The past thirty years, however, have seen significant increases in black suburbanization, along with the return of whites to some central city neighborhoods. Still, suburban neighborhoods are more than twice as likely to be *exclusively white* than city neighborhoods (58 percent versus 21 percent).⁵ And almost no *predominantly or exclusively black* neighborhoods are located outside of central cities.

Because there are so many more suburban than central city neighborhoods, the national picture of black-

FIGURE 5. Black-White Neighborhood Composition in 2000, Central Cities and Suburbs

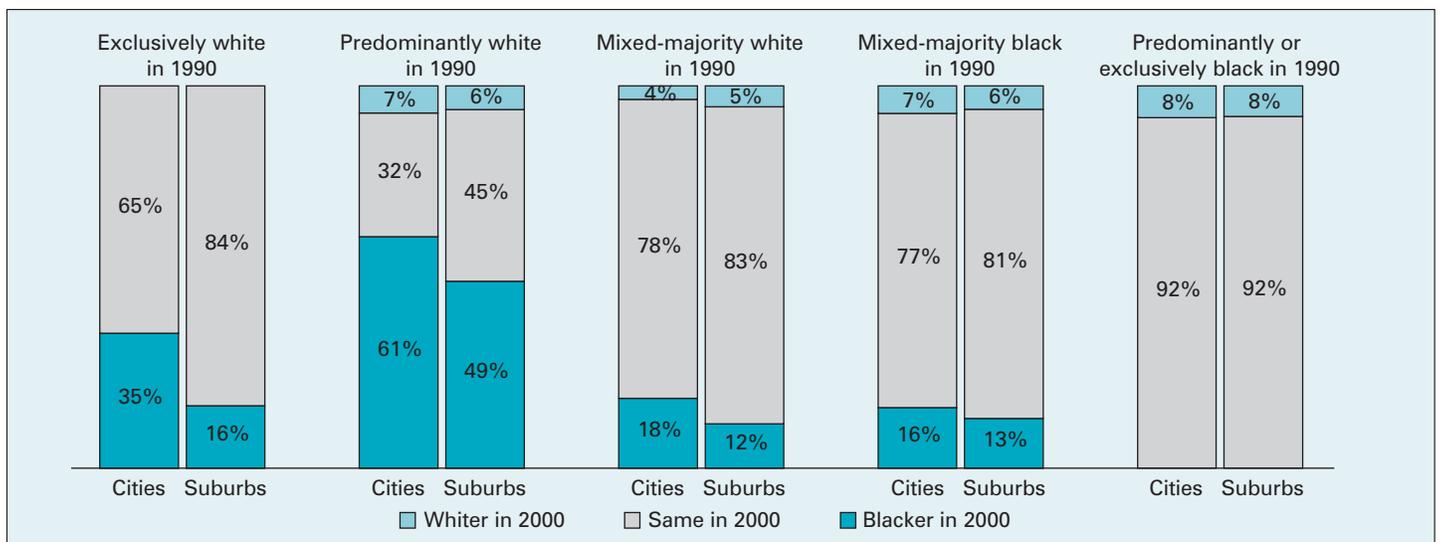


Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

white neighborhood change is dominated by what is going on in the suburbs. This section explores the question of whether patterns of black-white neighborhood transition differ for cities and suburbs. Again, we begin by focusing on shifts between the five broad neighborhood categories, and then zoom in to focus on smaller transitions within the *mixed-majority white* and *mixed-majority black* groups.

In general, patterns of neighborhood racial change are consistent across central city and suburban neighborhoods (figure 6). However, in most categories, suburban neighborhoods were somewhat less likely to become blacker than city neighborhoods. Among neighborhoods that were *exclusively white* in 1990, for example, 84 percent of suburban neighborhoods remained so in 2000, compared with only 65 percent of city

FIGURE 6. Change in Black-White Neighborhood Composition from 1990 to 2000, Central Cities and Suburbs



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

neighborhoods. For those that were predominantly white in 1990, 45 percent of suburban neighborhoods stayed in the same category throughout the decade, compared with only 32 percent of central city neighborhoods. For the mixed-majority white and mixed-majority black neighborhoods, the patterns for the suburbs were very similar to those in the city, with about three-quarters of the neighborhoods remaining in the same category for the city and slightly over 80 percent for the suburbs. And finally, for neighborhoods that were predominantly or exclusively black in 1990, there was no difference between city and suburban neighborhood change, with over 92 percent of neighborhoods in both groups remaining in the same category in 2000 as in 1990 and the remaining 8 percent becoming whiter (more integrated).

Mixed-Majority White Neighborhoods

Again we find that patterns are very similar across central city and suburban neighborhoods, although generally, suburban neighborhoods were more likely to remain the same over the decade, whereas central city neighborhoods were more likely to become blacker (figure 7). To illustrate, among suburban neighborhoods that were 10 to 20 percent black in 1990, 49 percent remained the same, 10 percent became whiter, and the remaining 41 percent became blacker (more integrated). In central city neighborhoods that started out in the same category, 37 percent remained the same, 7 percent became whiter, and the remaining 56 percent became blacker. Among neighborhoods at the high end of this range (40 to 50 percent black), there was no real difference between cities and suburbs; only 27 percent of the neighborhoods

FIGURE 7. Change in Black-White Neighborhood Composition from 1990 to 2000, Central Cities and Suburbs, Mixed-Majority White Neighborhoods



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

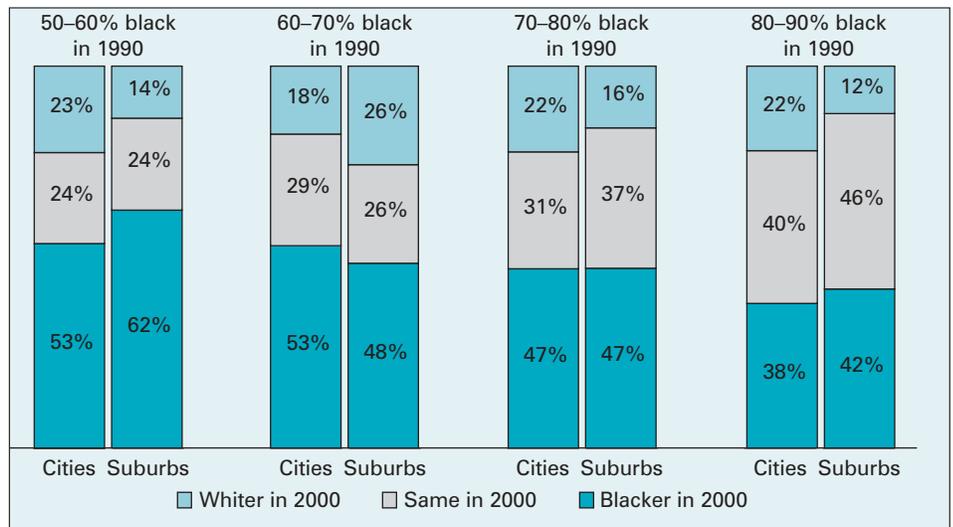
remained the same for both city and suburban groups, with 20 percent becoming whiter and the remaining 52 percent becoming blacker.

Mixed-Majority Black Neighborhoods

Differences between central city and suburban neighborhood trends were smaller among mixed-majority black

neighborhoods (figure 8). In general, as the initial size of a neighborhood's black population rose, its stability increased. But for the two blackest subcategories, suburban neighborhoods were somewhat more stable than city neighborhoods. Among suburban neighborhoods that were 70 to 80 percent black in 1990, 37 percent remained the same over the decade, while 16 percent became whiter and

FIGURE 8. Change in Black-White Neighborhood Composition from 1990 to 2000, Central Cities and Suburbs, Mixed-Majority Black Neighborhoods



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

47 percent became blacker. For central city neighborhoods in the same initial subcategory, 31 percent remained the same, while 22 percent became whiter and 47 percent became blacker.

Metropolitan Variations in Patterns of Racial Change

Metropolitan areas across the United States differ in important ways that may influence patterns of neighborhood racial change. In particular, metropolitan areas with relatively large black populations generally have larger populations overall, and many of those in the Northeast or Midwest have long histories of extreme residential segregation. Because of this history, it seems likely that racially integrated neighborhoods may be less stable in metropolitan areas where the black population is relatively large than in those where blacks make up a smaller proportion of the total population. Therefore, this section divides the 69 metropolitan areas in our analysis sample into three groups, based upon the relative size of their black populations (table 1), and examines patterns of

TABLE 1. Neighborhood Composition by Metropolitan Area Size

Metro Area Group	Metro percent black			Neighborhood share	
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Number	Percent of total
Lowest third (small)	0.9	9.8	6.4	6,748	27
Middle third (medium)	10.1	17.4	13.4	7,775	31
Highest third (large)	18.7	40.6	25.1	10,611	42
Total				25,134	100

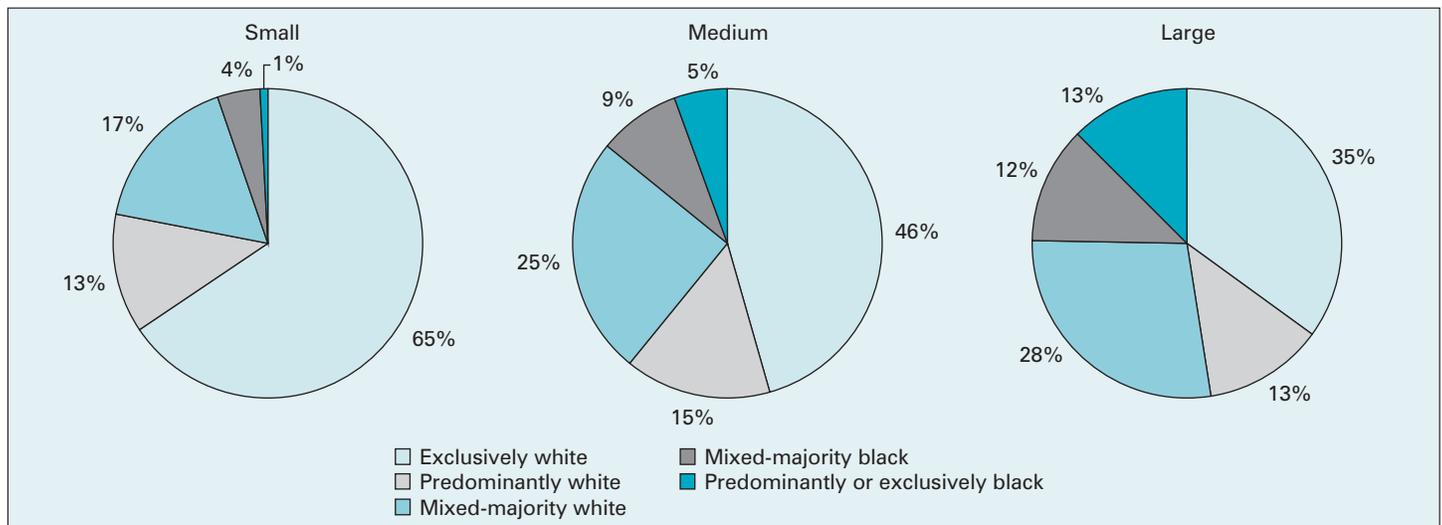
Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

neighborhood change for each of these three groups.

Not surprisingly, as figure 9 illustrates, metropolitan areas with small black populations have the largest share of *exclusively white* neighborhoods (65 percent) and the smallest share of *predominantly or exclusively black* neighborhoods (1 percent). In metropolitan areas with medium black populations, 46 percent of neighborhoods are exclusively white and 5 percent are predominantly or exclusively black. Finally, in metropolitan areas with the largest black populations, only 35 percent of neighborhoods are exclusively white and 13 percent are predominantly or exclusively black.

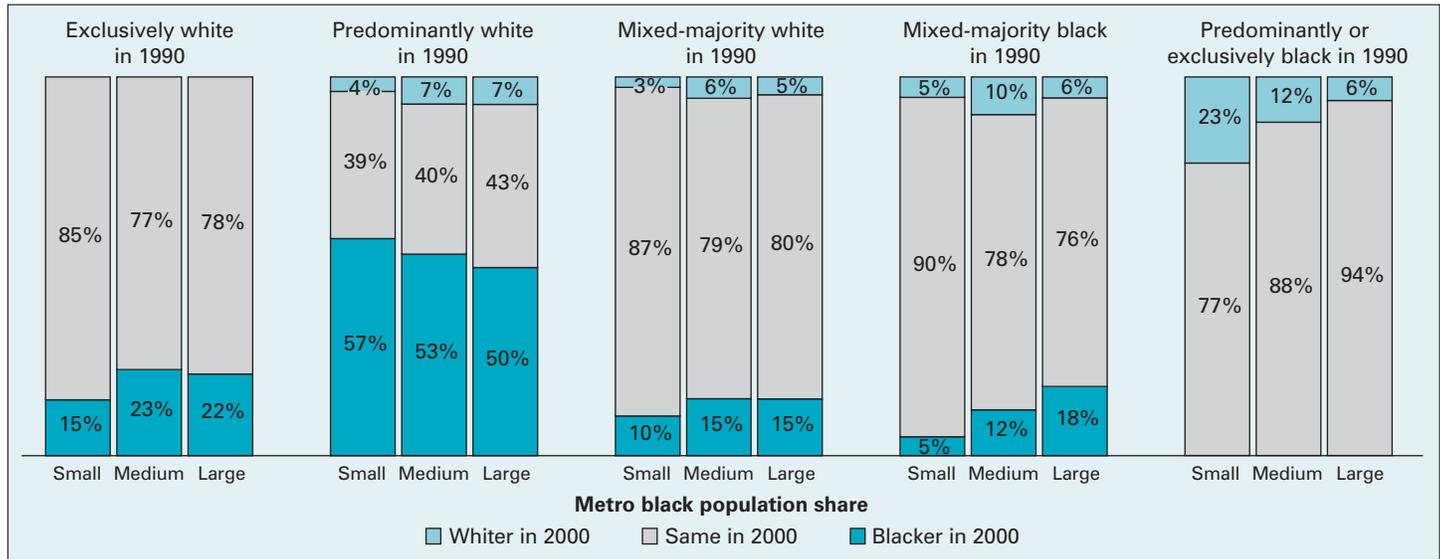
Despite the important differences between these three groups of metropolitan areas, patterns of change in neighborhood racial composition during the 1990s are strikingly similar (see figure 10). For all three groups, neighborhood transitions were most likely to occur among neighborhoods that were *predominantly white* in 1990. Contrary to our expectations, neighborhoods in metropolitan areas with relatively large black populations were not substantially more likely to become blacker over the course of the decade. In fact, for *predominantly white* neighborhoods, the likelihood of becoming blacker (more integrated) was highest in the metropolitan areas with small black

FIGURE 9. Black-White Neighborhood Composition in 2000, by Metro Area Black Population Share, All Neighborhoods



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

FIGURE 10. Black-White Continuity and Change, by Metro Area Black Population Share in 2000 and Black-White Category in 1990, All Neighborhoods



Source: Urban Institute Neighborhood Change Database.

populations (57 percent) and lowest in the metropolitan areas with large black populations (50 percent). Only among *mixed-majority black* neighborhoods do we see a clear link between the size of a metropolitan area’s black population and the tendency of neighborhoods to become blacker. In addition, in metropolitan areas with small black populations, *exclusively white* neighborhoods appear most likely to stay that way and *predominantly or exclusively black* neighborhoods have the greatest likelihood of becoming whiter.

Summary and Conclusions

For the past three decades, black-white segregation in metropolitan America has slowly declined, although it has remained disturbingly high. This analysis looks behind the overall decline in segregation between 1990 and 2000, tracking changes in the composition of neighborhoods based upon their racial composition at the start of the decade. The experience of city and suburban neighborhoods in the 1990s offers

grounds for cautious optimism about the prospects for stable black-white integration, although most neighborhoods still remain either exclusively white or predominantly black. More specifically, in the 69 metropolitan areas we examined, just over three-fifths of all whites (61.6 percent) live in neighborhoods that are exclusively white (less than 5 percent black) and well over half of all blacks (56.8 percent) live in neighborhoods that are majority black (greater than 50 percent black).⁶

The overall picture is one of black-white stability. We grouped neighborhoods into five categories according to their black-white composition in 1990—exclusively white, predominantly white, mixed-majority white, mixed-majority black, and predominantly or exclusively black—and found that over three-quarters of them were in the same category in 2000.

Racial tipping is not inevitable. Of the neighborhoods that did change categories, most moved in the direction of becoming blacker, but some neighborhoods in every cate-

gory became whiter. For example, 5 percent of neighborhoods that were *mixed-majority white* in 1990 had shifted into the *predominantly white* category by 2000, while an equal share of those that were *mixed-majority black* became *mixed-majority white*. We divided the *mixed-majority white* category into four subgroups, and found that although the neighborhoods that changed in each subgroup were more likely to become blacker than whiter, nearly half the neighborhoods in each subgroup either stayed the same or became whiter.

Majority-black neighborhoods are considerably more likely to become blacker over time. When we divided the *mixed-majority black* category into subgroups we found considerably less stability than for the *mixed-majority white* neighborhoods. Even for the most stable subgroup—80 to 90 percent black in 1990—only 42 percent of neighborhoods were still in the same subgroup in 2000. Still, although more of the neighborhoods that moved in each subgroup became blacker over the 1990s, at

least 20 percent of neighborhoods in each subgroup became whiter.

Suburban neighborhoods are less likely to experience racial transition than central city neighborhoods. Obviously, a larger share of suburban neighborhoods are exclusively or predominantly white, but for every category, suburban neighborhoods were more likely than city neighborhoods to either remain in the same category or become whiter over the course of the 1990s.

Contrary to expectations, neighborhoods in metropolitan areas with large black populations are just as stable as those in areas with small black populations. In fact, predominantly white neighborhoods in metropolitan areas with small black populations were the most likely to become more racially mixed over the course of the 1990s.

Thus, our analysis counters claims that once neighborhoods reach a certain black concentration, they inevitably shift to becoming increasingly black. Change is apparent in both directions along the black-white spectrum. Substantial numbers of neighborhoods that were exclusively white in 1990 moved to a blacker category. Since the exclusively white category is by far the largest group, this movement represents a major trend toward greater overall integration. However, this promising finding is tempered by the fact that many neighborhoods remain highly segregated by race.

Endnotes

1. For the purposes of this analysis, we define neighborhoods as census tracts.
2. It is important to recognize that by focusing on patterns of black-white change, this analysis excludes several of the nation's largest urban areas, including New York, Los Angeles, and Miami. Although we limit the number of Hispanics at the metropolitan statistical area level we realize that our analysis likely still includes neighborhoods with a significant presence of Hispanics, Asians, and other ethnic minorities. In future studies, we hope to explore patterns of multiethnic neighborhood change.
3. The Neighborhood Change Database (NCDB) is the main source of decennial census data used in this report. Funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, the NCDB is a joint project between the Urban Institute and Geolytics, Inc., to develop a national set of comparable population and housing variables from the 1970, 1980, 1990, and 2000 decennial censuses. A methodology has been developed to link the associated data to 2000 census tract boundaries so that consistent comparisons can be made across census years.
4. Our use of the term "white" in fact includes Hispanic, Asian, and other minority groups. However, the impact of these groups on tract composition is negligible, because our sample of metropolitan areas excludes those with significant nonblack minority populations.
5. In 1990, 68 percent of suburban neighborhoods were exclusively white, as were 30 percent of central city neighborhoods.
6. For the 100 largest metropolitan areas, nearly two-thirds of all whites (64.8 percent) live in neighborhoods that are exclusively white (less than 5 percent black) and just over half of all blacks (52.3 percent) live in neighborhoods that are majority black, or greater than 50 percent black.

About the Authors



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The Rockefeller Foundation has funded the Urban Institute to conduct a project that will advance knowledge about neighborhood change in America's urban areas, particularly as it occurred over the 1990s. The project has had two purposes. The first was to develop the Neighborhood Change Database (NCDB)—the only database that contains nationwide census data at the tract level with tract boundaries and variables consistently defined across the four U.S. censuses from 1970 through 2000 (for more information about the NCDB, visit <http://www.geolytics.com>). The second was to conduct research on neighborhood change using the NCDB, focusing particularly on changes in the concentration of poverty, conditions in distressed neighborhoods, and racial patterns. This brief is one product of that research.

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