

Perceiving the Metropolis: Seeing the City through a Prism of Race

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White flight, or decisions to move away from certain communities, have historically been a force that has contributed to the patterns of racial residential segregation in our nation's large metropolises. Recent research, however, has highlighted that the choices people make about moving into certain communities are a critical mechanism that helps to maintain metropolitan patterns of racial residential segregation (e.g., Crowder 2000). These choices are based, in part, on people's knowledge and impressions of the various communities within their metropolitan area. Understanding how residents perceive the range of communities in their metropolitan area and how those perceptions are shaped by race—both of the respondent and in the composition of the community—can help determine whether these perceptions help perpetuate or attenuate racial residential segregation.

Building on findings from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality (MCSUI) that analyzed a small number of community desirability ratings in four metropolitan areas (Krysan 2002), the present paper reports on new data collected in Chicago and Detroit that overcome some of the limitations of this earlier work. Specifically, MCSUI asked only about the desirability of 4-7 communities in each of the four metropolitan areas (Atlanta, Boston, Detroit and Los Angeles) and did not ask about actual search behavior or about respondent's level of knowledge about the communities. The 2004 Chicago Area Study and Detroit Area Study included an innovative methodology to overcome these weaknesses by capturing a broader range of community evaluations that allow a better picture of the "cognitive maps" that people develop to evaluate the metropolitan area in which they reside.

In 2004, we conducted parallel face-to-face, computer-assisted personal interviews in Chicago (n=800) and Detroit (n=740) focused on the micro-level decisions people make about housing and perceptions people hold about communities within the metropolitan area. The data come from multi-stage area probability samples designed to over-sample African Americans (in Chicago and Detroit) and Latinos (in Chicago), as well as residents of racially mixed neighborhoods. Among the innovations in this study was the use of color maps of each metropolitan area to measure the respondents' knowledge and impressions about communities within their metropolitan area.

Each map identified a large number (33 in Detroit; 41 in Chicago) of both suburban and central city communities. Respondents were asked to examine each map and then identify (by marking an X directly on the map) those communities: (1) that they did not know anything about; (2) in which they had searched for housing in the last 10 years; (3)

in which they would seriously consider looking for a house or apartment; and (4) in which they would never consider looking for a house or apartment.

In this paper, we analyze reactions to all of the communities identified on the maps in each of the two metropolitan areas. For every community included in the map, we will ask whether or not there are racial differences along each of the four different dimensions about which we asked respondents (knowledge of the community; actual housing search history; desirability; and undesirability). In our models predicting the assessments of each community, we will include an array of other respondent social and demographic characteristics (age, income, owner/renter, etc.) in addition to race of respondent both to assess the degree to which such controls reduce any observed racial differences and to identify their independent effects on the assessment of the various communities.

Finally, we will conduct further analyses using the “community” as the unit of analysis in order to identify the degree to which racial composition, social class, school quality and geographical location (distance from central city, for example) of the communities distinguish between the regard in which African Americans, Latinos and whites hold those communities.