

Spatial Assimilation and Neighborhood Transitions (Abstract)

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Residential mobility is associated with assimilation and social mobility processes. Spatial Assimilation, rooted in the work of Park and Burgess (1921) and Wirth (1928), posits that immigrants tend to live in ethnic enclaves (usually less desirable places with high concentrations of immigrants) due to financial, social and cultural capital constraints but are motivated to move to better neighborhoods as they become more assimilated to American life and economically successful. Hence, as families increase their levels of socioeconomic standing, length of residence in the United States, and acculturation they are also more likely to move to less ethnically concentrated and economically impoverished neighborhoods

While this model fits closely with the settlement patterns of European immigrants at the turn of the 20th century, scholars have argued that current immigrant experiences differ. Logan, Alba and Zhang (2002) suggest that because contemporary immigrants are increasingly diverse with respect to their socioeconomic positions, market position and acculturation are increasingly decoupled and there is evidence that some immigrant groups live in ethnic communities (ethnic neighborhoods in affluent areas) due to preference, not economic constraint. Given that socioeconomic mobility may not necessarily drive the process of spatial assimilation, the transitions of immigrants and the second-generation out of ethnic neighborhoods may differ from what earlier theories might predict. Further, others suggest that among ethnic groups who encounter still discrimination and poverty in ethnic neighborhoods movement out of such settings may be hampered in ways not considered in the spatial assimilation model. Waters (1999) writes of West Indian immigrants in New York, “Even people who try to move to better neighborhoods seem to be followed inexorably by a cycle of neighborhood resegregation and economic decline.” (284)

A common approach taken to this question is to analyze settlement patterns of immigrant and second-generation groups cross-sectionally across decennial Censuses. One drawback of this is that it obscures the dynamics of the mobility process. An alternative approach would be to follow the mobility patterns of individuals over time, analyze their transition rates to and from different types of neighborhoods and examine the factors which affect these transitions. This paper takes such an approach with an event history analysis of the mobility patterns of a sample of adults from Los Angeles County.

Research Questions

This analysis examines mobility between neighborhoods and the individual level factors which affect the likelihood of making neighborhood transitions. The transitions which will be examined include neighborhoods that are poor/non-poor and have high/low concentrations of immigrants. I am interested in the effect of individual characteristics on these transitions, particularly the effect of one’s nativity, length of residence in United States, generation, race-

ethnicity, age, and income. I hope to engage a number of questions which have been raised in the assimilation literature:

- Do we find, as assimilation theory would predict, that as immigrant families spend more time in the US or as the children of immigrants come of age and make socioeconomic advances they are more likely to move into neighborhoods which are less economically impoverished and immigrant concentrated?
- Are the transitions of immigrants and the second-generation out of ethnic neighborhoods independent from their transitions out of poor neighborhoods as an ethnic community model suggests?
- Do the residential transitions of the second generation of racial minority groups suggest that they are experiencing decline in terms of their neighborhoods as segmented assimilation posits?

Data and Approach

This analysis makes use of the residential mobility histories of a stratified sample of adults from the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey, a panel study of a representative sample of families in Los Angeles County and the neighborhoods in which they live. The first wave of data, collected in 2000-2001, interviewed 3090 households in a stratified probability sample of 65 neighborhoods (census tracts). Within these households, the survey provides two-year residential mobility histories for 2620 adults, who are the basis for this analysis. The mobility histories of these adults are geo-coded and linked to Census and administrative data on the characteristics of their neighborhoods. Models will also include the effects of a variety of individual social and demographic factors, including race-ethnicity, age, income, home ownership status, and nativity.

This analysis makes use of competing risk multi-state event history analysis to calculate the hazard of transitioning between neighborhood types (Allison, 1998). Competing risks analysis is a method of treating various kinds of moves differently in the analysis. This analysis treats time as continuous since moves can occur at any point in the two year interval. The proportional hazard function can be expressed as follows:

$$\text{Log } h_{ij}(t) = \alpha_j(t) + \beta_j x_i(t) \quad j=1, \dots, J$$

Where the likelihood of making a transition between neighborhood type j to j' is a function of time-specific intercepts α , $x_i(t)$ is a vector of covariates, some of which may vary with time, and coefficient vector β is subscripted to indicate the effects of the covariates may be different for different neighborhood types j . The $\alpha(t)$ function also allows the dependence of the hazard on time to vary across types.

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