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Residential Segregation and Attitudes of Upper Middle-Class White Americans Towards Welfare

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Introduction

In 1903 Du Bois used the term “color line” to explain the invisible segregation between blacks and whites when it came to neighborhoods and the places where social interaction took place, thus causing each side to see the negatives in each other (Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt and Marable 2015). This was one of the first descriptions of what has now become residential segregation. The United States would then go on to have race riots and a spike of unrest in urban ghettos. Due to growing concern about the state of the nation, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the Kerner Commission, a task force designed in part to quell the racial rioting and to also find preventative measures to end residential segregation. Their findings issued the infamous statement; that as a nation we were “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (Charles 2003). Due to these findings of the Kerner Commission, the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was created in hopes to help minorities find housing without discrimination. Unfortunately during the 1970s, poverty among minorities was at an all-time high, with most minorities in metropolitan areas and inner cities finding themselves in areas of high concentrated disadvantage (Massey 1993). While residential segregation can be observed along racial lines it becomes even more focused when observed along class and income levels. In a study of residential concentration by income among the United States top ten metropolitan areas, the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex ranked second behind Houston for having the highest amount of residential concentration by income showing that those who consider themselves as upper-income or upper class live in areas where they are surrounded by people like themselves (Fry and Taylor 2012) and away from areas populated with minorities and those most likely to need government assistance. Theorists have stated that because of this kind of residential segregation, income disparities have created the need for welfare (Lobmayer and Wilkinson 2002), and thus it is imperative that not only are the links between levels of residential segregation and welfare recipients examined, but societal attitudes of upper middle-class white Americans living in these areas towards welfare recipients need to be examined. This demographic has been underreported and where research is concerned, vastly overlooked.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between levels of residential segregation and attitudes of upper middle-class white Americans toward the welfare state. This will be accomplished by a quantitative analysis of survey results accompanied by existing data regarding residential segregation with a focus on the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex area.

Rationale

While there is research regarding residential segregation and attitudes toward welfare, very little of it links the two together. Much of the literature is directed at how this form of segregation indirectly causes income inequality, downward mobility for minorities and concentrated disadvantage, but stops short of explicitly stating that it causes welfare. There is a large gap in the literature regarding upper middle-class white Americans and their attitudes towards welfare recipients. What does exist only looks at welfare recipients from a white point of view, but it goes no further in pinpointing a specific class or demographic within the white population. For these reasons this study looks to fill a gap in the research that currently exists.

Literature Review

Despite the passing of anti-discrimination laws, substantial levels of residential segregation, especially when looking at race, still persists. Large amounts of research have been aimed at trying to elucidate why minorities are still isolated from predominately white areas. Discrimination, socioeconomic status and prejudice are common reasons given in most of the literature, as well as looking at the lack of spatial assimilation most minorities, especially African Americans, have obtained (Charles 2003). Spatial assimilation occurs when a minority is able to become economically mobile and move into areas with high white populations. While there are some metropolitan areas in which that is possible for Asian and Hispanic groups, the majority of metropolitan areas show areas of highly concentrated affluence that appears to be predominately white while areas around them show high levels of concentrated disadvantage (Florida 2017). Socioeconomic status is given as the reason for the lack up upward mobility in minorities, as many are unable to finish high school and find high paying jobs, thus lacking the ability to move into areas that whites already occupy. With residential segregation at an all-time high, researchers are finding more homogenous neighborhoods in terms of family income and/or socioeconomic levels (Markussen and Roed 2018). This can make it even harder for minorities to overcome a “ceiling effect” that happens when income plateaus in an area that is disadvantaged (Lewis and Sinha 2007). Residential segregation is directly tied to income inequality (Bailey et al. 2013; Lobmayer and Wilkinson 2002; Watson 2009) which directly feeds into the need for welfare.

While the word “welfare” should conjure up feelings of happiness or even prosperity, the way in which it is used today is just the opposite (Cammisa 2018). Areas with high amounts of residential segregation also have high amounts of welfare spending, with many believing in the “deservingness” theory, a notion that there are people and programs worth spending money on. TANF (Temporary assistance for needy families) has very low support due to this theory, as many interpret it as a program used by single mothers who have more kids than they should or teen mothers who were promiscuous (van Oorschot et al. 2017). There is high support for programs for groups that society deems “worthy” such as the elderly, disabled and children (Hasenfeld and Rafferty 1989). Even though use of government programs such as TANF, Medicaid and food stamps are also utilized by whites, when most people are asked questions regarding welfare recipients the mental stereotype conjured up in the minds of Americans is one of an African American (Brown-Iannuzzi et al. 2017). African Americans are stereotyped as lazy, unskilled, unintelligent, loud and violent (Sears et al. 1997). Welfare stereotyping goes beyond just African Americans in today’s society. Due to increased immigration welfare chauvinism has now been introduced into American politics, with people believing that only native born Americans should benefit from government support programs and bringing false myths about illegal immigration and welfare to the forefront of political scare tactics (Freeman 2009; Hjorth 2016; Larsen 2008) with politicians using racially-coded speeches to instill fear of illegal immigrants. Immigrants are painted as “job stealers” while African Americans are now painted as welfare abusers (Brown 2016). Stigma surrounding welfare remains at an all-time high (Bailey et al. 2013) with most research focused on attitudes towards welfare at a national level (Gilens 1995) or a race level (Gilens 1996) but nothing by class. Because residential segregation seems to be created and perpetuated by upper middle-class white Americans, it seems that there should be literature that sheds light on their own attitudes towards those who receive welfare, but none exists on a class plus income level.

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