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**All Suburbs Are Not Created Equal: A New Look at
Racial Differences in Suburban Location**

Report No. 99-440

Research Report

PSC POPULATION STUDIES CENTER
AT THE INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

All Suburbs Are Not Created Equal: A New Look at Racial Differences in Suburban Location

September 1999

Abstract:

In academic discourse, policy discussions, media portrayals, and everyday speech, “suburb” is often used as shorthand for an affluent, predominantly white community with good schools and little crime. While there never has been a time when all suburbs conformed to this idealized notion, in the past few decades the gap between real and imagined U.S. suburbs has widened. As a result, it is difficult to interpret recent increases in minority suburbanization. Given variation in suburbs, can we conclude that the suburbs where blacks, Hispanics, and Asians live are more advantaged than central cities? I examine this question by first developing a socioeconomic status-based typology of suburbs, and then using it to reexamine racial differences in suburbanization. Census data from 1980 and 1990 reveal large differences in socioeconomic status between suburbs, with most low suburbs being less advantaged than central cities. These suburbs were disproportionately populated by blacks and Hispanics, while Asians and whites were overrepresented in the most affluent suburbs. Observed racial differences persist even after individual-level controls for socioeconomic status are employed.

Datasets used: Census: U.S., 1970, 1980, and 1990 // Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID): U.S., 1990

Acknowledgements:

An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 1999 meeting of the American Sociological Association, Chicago. I thank Jean D’Amico, Lisa Neidert, and Sherry Briske for their assistance.

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In the American vernacular, as well as in the writings of academics and novelists, suburbs are often portrayed as idyllic escapes from the stresses of urban life. The typical suburb is thought to be predominantly white and affluent, home to families with children, and blessed with good schools and little crime. While this is the view that dominates our national perspective, there is an increasingly vocal perspective that argues the suburbs I have just described are not typical, but stereotypical. Observers are recognizing that a nontrivial number of suburbs have large nonwhite populations, few affluent residents, weak schools, and significant crime problems (Bourne 1996; Frey 1998; Phillips 1997). While few challenge the notion that there is variation among suburbs, there is nevertheless persistence in the idealized way we conceptualize about suburbs. This stereotype is not only misleading in its own right, but has the secondary effect of producing overly optimistic assessments of advances in racial equality.

In this paper I directly assess both the degree of heterogeneity among suburbs as well as the overlap between suburbs and the central cities they surround. Using a socioeconomic status-based typology of suburbs, I extend previous work by assessing how racial groups are distributed across more and less advantaged suburbs. I consider suburban residence not only in 1990, but also look at changes over the 1980s, and examine the locations of blacks, whites, Asians, and Latinos, rather than adopting the typical black-white dichotomy.¹ Finally, to test whether observed racial differences in suburban location are due to racial differences in economic resources, I perform an analysis of the relationship between family-level socioeconomic status and suburb type.

Suburbs in the United States

Kenneth Jackson (1985) provides a detailed history of suburbanization in the United States. Among the many myths shattered by his analysis is the notion that suburbs are a recent phenomenon. Jackson argues that throughout this nation's history people have lived on the periphery of central cities. However, what has changed recently is the proportion of Americans living in suburbs, the characteristics of suburban dwellers, and the functional use of suburbs. In the early years of the nineteenth century, the overwhelming majority of Americans lived in cities or on farms. While in a relative sense this situation changed dramatically over the remainder of the nineteenth century, the absolute number of suburbanites remained small. Jackson argues that transportation was the key limiting factor on suburban growth during the nineteenth century, as commuting options were often expensive and unreliable. However, with mass production of the automobile and increased federal subsidies for road construction, suburbs grew in the early 1900s. With this growth came a change in the suburban population, as wealthy landholders and the impoverished workers who tended to them were joined by middle-class families.

While the transformation of the suburbs in the first half of the twentieth century was substantial, these changes pale in comparison to what happened after World War II. Jackson argues that myriad factors, including the Baby Boom, homebuilding innovations, highway construction, postwar prosperity, racial discrimination, and government policies, combined to spark an unprecedented growth in the suburban population. This dramatic shift in the spatial distribution of the population has affected every aspect of life in the U.S., from our culture, to politics, to the way we interact with one another and our conceptions of community (see also Schneider 1992).

¹ In this paper the terms “white”, “black”, and “Asian” refer to nonhispanics. Hispanics may be of any race. Also, “Latino” and “Hispanic” are used interchangeably, as are “black” and “African American”.

It is this immediate postwar period that has had the greatest effect on how we think about suburbs. As the Levitts and other builders attempted to address the nation's housing shortage, former farmlands sprouted thousands of homes that became inhabited by thousands of families. To keep building costs low, these new homes were often identical to one another. Adding to the sense of homogeneity was the fact that most of the new suburban residents were at a very similar point in the life course. As a community newspaper of the time observed, "our lives are held closely together because most of us are within the same age bracket, in similar income groups, live in almost identical houses and have common problems" (quoted in Jackson 1985: 235).

While the postwar boom in suburbanization has continued, there have been two important changes in suburbs since 1970. First, suburbs have shifted from residential centers to centers of housing and employment. Between 1970 and 1990, the share of metropolitan area jobs in suburbs grew by 22%. During this same period the share of the metropolitan area population living in the suburbs grew by only 11% (Bourne 1996). So extreme is this transformation that since 1980, commuting within the suburbs, rather than between cities and suburbs, has been the modal commuting pattern in the U.S. (Baldassare 1992). In addition to changes in the functions of suburbs, recent decades have also seen changes in the character of suburbs. While there has always been crime, poverty, and dilapidated housing on the peripheries of cities, there is evidence that these and other traditional problems of cities have been creeping into suburbs (Jackson 1985; Phillips 1997). As a result, some argue that many suburbs now differ from central cities primarily because of arbitrary political distinctions, as opposed to differences in social composition (Baldassare 1992; Frey 1998; Jackson 1985). Bourne (1996) goes so far as to claim that suburbs are "becoming more unlike each other and more like the older city, with which they are still closely linked" (166).

Race and Suburbanization

Despite the tremendous population shift from cities to suburbs that occurred after World War II, most suburbs remained all-white communities. Economics and bigotry combined to exclude blacks, Latinos, and Asians from the desirable new neighborhoods that were sprouting up across the nation. Instead, these groups found themselves confined to central cities that, due to the widespread white flight that was occurring, were quickly losing many of their traditional advantages. Jackson (1985) provides a striking example of the magnitude of racial exclusion in postwar suburbs. He observes that the Levitts, whose developments were at the forefront of the new suburbanization, "publicly and officially refused to sell to blacks for two decades after the war" (241). As a result, in 1960 there were no blacks among the 82,000 residents of Long Island's Levittown.

As suburbs have recently become more diverse in socioeconomic status and function, they have also experienced marked increases in racial diversification. Due in large part to the anti-discrimination laws of the 1960s, blacks, Latinos, and Asians have increasingly been able to acquire homes in the suburbs. Between 1970 and 1980, the share of metropolitan area blacks who lived in the suburbs grew by 24 percent. This boom in black suburbanization continued through the 1980s, albeit at a slightly lower rate of 18 percent. By comparison, the share of the total metropolitan population that resided in the suburbs increased by 8 percent in the 1970s, and 3 percent in the 1980s, for all races (Frey 1996; Long and DeAre 1981). The result of two decades of accelerated in-migration by nonwhites was that by 1990, America's suburbs were 82 percent white, 3 percent Asian, 8 percent Latino, and 7 percent black (Frey 1996). This is still a

long way from racial equality in suburban attainment, but nevertheless represents a dramatic improvement over previous periods.

While many have applauded increased minority suburbanization and heralded it as an indication of increasing racial equality (e.g., Frey and O'Hare 1993; Marshall 1994; O'Hare and Frey 1992; O'Hare, Frey, and Fost 1994; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997), it is not clear that the movement of nonwhites across city lines is cause for celebration. Doubt emerges from a series of studies that find locational amenities are unevenly distributed by race. Termed the place stratification hypothesis (Logan and Alba 1993), this argument implies that blacks, Latinos, and to a lesser extent Asians, reside in the least advantaged suburbs. At the extreme, the suburbs racial minorities inhabit may be so disadvantaged that suburbanization actually represents horizontal, or even downward social mobility.

Strong support for the place stratification hypothesis emerges in a series of articles that explore racial differences in locational attainment (Alba and Logan 1991; Alba and Logan 1993; Alba, Logan, and Bellair 1994; Logan and Alba 1993; Logan, Alba, Leung 1996; Logan et al. 1996).² This work consistently finds that the neighbors of white and Asian suburbanites are more likely to be white and affluent, and less likely to be the victims of crime, than are the neighbors of Latino, and especially black, suburban residents. These racial differences persist even after controlling for individual-level factors, and appear across the income and education distributions.

Further support for the place stratification hypothesis is found in articles that both confirm and extend the findings of Alba, Logan, and their collaborators (e.g., South and Crowder 1997, 1998). A notable example is Massey and Denton's (1988) work on racial residential segregation in cities and suburbs, which contains three findings that are particularly germane to the place stratification hypothesis. First, they observe that blacks, Latinos, and Asians are each more likely to have white neighbors when they live in the suburbs. Second, they find that Latinos, and especially Asians, experience a relatively high degree of contact with whites in the suburbs. Third, despite their advantage over central city blacks, blacks in the suburbs remain segregated from whites at high levels (see also Galster 1991).

There is also ample support for the place stratification hypothesis with regards to the economic context of suburbs. Not only do black suburbanites tend to live in the poorest suburbs, but during the 1980s black populations grew fastest in suburbs with the lowest socioeconomic status (Fitzpatrick and Hwang 1990; Hwang and Murdock 1999; Schneider and Phelan 1993). The implication of living in poorer suburbs is that blacks pay higher taxes and experience smaller increases in the value of their homes than do white suburban dwellers. The situation for Asians is much better. Unlike blacks, there is little evidence that the suburbs where Asians live differ in socioeconomic status from the suburbs whites call home. Also consistent with broader research on racial inequality (Farley 1996) is the finding that Latinos occupy an intermediary position in the racial hierarchy, living in suburbs that are not as wealthy as those of whites or Asians, but more affluent than the suburbs where blacks live (Hwang and Murdock 1999; Phelan and Schneider 1996).

Beyond Suburbs

Despite indications that suburban residence may mean something very different for blacks, whites, Latinos, and Asians, and indeed that similar racial inequities have persisted for

² Locational attainment is defined as "the ways in which racial and ethnic differences, interacting with other personal characteristics, affect minorities' residential integration with whites and their location in neighborhoods with more or fewer social resources" (Logan et al. 1996: 443).

decades (Farley 1970; Kramer 1972), the central city-suburb dichotomy nevertheless remains salient in academic research, policy discussions, government publications, and popular discourse (Bourne 1996; Harris 1999; Stark 1997). Typical of the academic approach to suburbs is a recent article by South and Crowder (1997). The authors acknowledge that “even within suburban rings (as within central cities) communities and neighborhoods can vary substantially in their locational amenities”, but they nevertheless ignore intrametropolitan variation in suburbs because “the available data do not permit us to differentiate among these communities” (528). Similar inattention to suburb heterogeneity is evident in myriad studies, including Alba et al. (1999), Frey (1979), Holzer (1996), Mills and Lubuele (1997), and Wilson (1996).

The danger in failing to consider differences between suburbs is evident in the work of Thernstrom and Thernstrom (1997). As part of their attempt to show that the United States has made great strides toward creating a colorblind society, the Thernstroms discuss black suburbanization. They first note that the number of blacks who moved to the suburbs between 1970 and 1995 was greater than the number of blacks who moved North during the middle decades of the twentieth century. As a result, the number of blacks with suburban addresses has doubled since 1970. Based on this evidence they conclude that “middle-class blacks are as eager as their white counterparts to avoid neighborhoods dominated by poor people and the problems that go with them, and in the past quarter century or so great numbers of them have been able to do so” (213). While there is no question that black suburbanization has been on the rise, the conclusions that the Thernstroms draw from this fact do not necessarily follow. It is entirely possible that a large percentage of black suburbanites live in neighborhoods with poverty rates, crime rates, and schools that are similar to those found in central cities. If so, then the Thernstroms’ failure to look within the suburban mass and see the types of suburbs where blacks live causes them to incorrectly conclude that, as a group, blacks now live in much better neighborhoods than they did in the recent past.

My solution to this problem is to replace the “suburb” with “suburbs”. Rather than assuming that “suburb” is synonymous with “advantaged community”, my goal is to develop a system for characterizing the socioeconomic status of suburbs and then use this schema to reexamine racial differences in suburbanization. In adopting this strategy I join a long line of scholars who have offered alternatives to the city-suburb dichotomy. An early proponent of a more complex vision of urban areas was Burgess (1925). His observation that urban areas tended to be organized in concentric zones, with industry and the poor being located closest to the city center and affluent families at the periphery, has been one of the major organizing principles of human ecology. Therefore, it is not surprising that a number of the attempts to reclassify urban areas focus on proximity to the city center and whether a community’s primary function is employment or residential. For example, Schnore (1972b) uses employment-to-residence ratios to define suburb types, and then shows that compared to suburbs that offer large numbers of manufacturing and trade jobs, those that are primarily residential have a higher share of white residents, high school graduates, and single-family homes. Like Schnore, Lake (1981) distinguishes among suburbs on the basis of land use, but his typology adds such factors as proximity to the central city, population density, and the presence of subsidized housing. Again, suburb types based largely on function are shown to have distinct racial and socioeconomic compositions, as well as diverse housing stocks. More recently Frey and Speare (1995) have proposed a system for distinguishing among suburbs. Once again suburb type is based on a community’s employment-to-residence ratio, population density, and proximity to the central city, though Frey and Speare differ from Lake in how they operationalize and combine these

factors. Nevertheless, Frey and Geverdt (1998) use the Frey-Speare typology to show that in the 1980s, as was the case in prior decades, the racial and social composition of suburbs was related to their functional and spatial characteristics.

While these typologies represent useful ways for describing urban areas, I maintain that they are of limited use for assessing racial differences in the experience of living in high socioeconomic status suburbs. The central problem is that although the factors that comprise these typologies are correlated with socioeconomic status, this relationship is far from perfect. As a result, if one wants to differentiate among suburbs on the basis of socioeconomic status, it is advisable to use a direct measure of socioeconomic status, instead of relying on factors that are imperfectly correlated with socioeconomic status. In other words, suburbs that have educated, wealthy residents and few crime problems are high socioeconomic status suburbs regardless of how close they are to the central city, how many people they employ, or how many people live in the average square mile. Thus in this paper I develop a schema for classifying suburbs on the basis of socioeconomic status, and use the resultant typology to assess racial differences in suburban location over the 1980s.

A Socioeconomic Status-Based Typology of Suburbs

My approach to defining a socioeconomic status-based typology of suburbs involves three main steps. First, I define a measure of socioeconomic status. Second, I compute socioeconomic status scores for all suburbs in a base year, and use this distribution of scores to define suburb types. Third, I compute socioeconomic status scores for suburbs in 1980 and 1990, using the same cutpoints as in the base year to allocate suburbs to types.

There are three critical decisions to be made in going from the broad outline of a suburb typology sketched above to a concrete typology that clearly defines suburb types. These are defining socioeconomic status, selecting a base year, and allocating segments of the socioeconomic status distribution to suburb types. In defining socioeconomic status I want an index that describes the economic, occupational, and educational distributions of suburbs (see Collver and Semyonov 1979 and Schnore 1972a for discussions of suburb socioeconomic status). After considering myriad indices of socioeconomic status, I decided to use a variant of the community socioeconomic status scale developed by Logan and Stearns (1981) and modified by Fitzpatrick and Hwang (1990) and Hwang and Murdock (1999). This index includes the following components: (1) percent of families not headed by a single female; (2) percent of families that are affluent, where affluent is defined as having an annual income in excess of \$50,000 (1990 dollars); (3) percent of residents in families with annual earnings above the federal poverty line; (4) mean annual family income; (5) percent of adults who have attended college; (6) percent of employed residents working in upper white collar occupations, where upper white collar refers to professional, technical, managerial, and executive occupations; and (7) adult employment rate. Each of the seven variables is standardized, so that it represents the level of a given trait relative to the level of that same trait in the larger metropolitan area.³ The composite measure of socioeconomic status is the mean of these seven indicators.

³ In standardizing the components of the index I join with other researchers in asserting that the socioeconomic status of suburbs should be judged relative to residents' other realistic options, which given current patterns of residential mobility can be constrained to the metropolitan area (Collver and Semyonov 1979; Schneider and Phelan 1993). Where possible standardization is conducted over consolidated statistical metropolitan areas.

The principal attraction of this index is that it captures multiple dimensions of socioeconomic status, including the economic, educational, and occupational resources of suburbs. Of course the index is not exhaustive, as data are not available for all possible indicators of socioeconomic status. For example, the scale includes no direct measures of crime, school quality, or the physical condition of the suburb. While these factors certainly provide important information about the current character of suburbs, as well as their future socioeconomic status (Blomquist, Berger, and Hoehn 1988; Skogan 1990), their omission likely has little effect on the rank ordering of suburbs. Due to our long tradition of residential segregation by race and class (Jargowsky 1997; Massey and Denton 1993), there is a high correlation between measures of socioeconomic status. Thus, suburbs with affluent, highly educated, professionals tend to be places with little violent crime, good schools, and a well-maintained infrastructure (Massey 1996).

The second step in defining the suburb typology is to select a base year. The purpose of the base year is to provide a fixed referent for suburb types. As a result, types indicate the socioeconomic status of suburbs in any given year relative to the distribution of socioeconomic status observed for suburbs in the base year. For this analysis I have selected 1970 as the base year. The principal reason for selecting 1970 is that it represents suburbs during the post-war period of mass suburbanization, and is a year for which ample data is available.

The last aspect of constructing the suburb typology is to translate the continuous measure of socioeconomic status into a series of discrete types. I characterize suburbs as belonging to one of three types—low, middle, or high socioeconomic status suburbs. These types are defined according to the distribution of socioeconomic status for 1970 suburbs. Low suburbs are in the bottom quintile of this distribution, middle suburbs are in the middle three quintiles, and high suburbs are in the top quintile. While my approach fixes the proportion suburbs that belong to each type in 1970, the distribution of suburb types is free to vary in other years. For example, if in 1990 no suburbs had a socioeconomic status score as low as the bottom quintile of 1970 suburbs, then there would be no low suburbs in that year. Furthermore, in light of evidence that suburbs experience shifts in socioeconomic status over relatively short periods (Collver and Semyonov 1979; Farley 1964; Guest 1978), I allow suburbs to change types across years of the analysis. The important point about this typology is that it allocates suburbs to types each year by comparing their socioeconomic status index score to the distribution of scores in 1970. While the choice of a base year and selection of cutpoints are both debatable, the value of each is that it anchors definitions of suburb types over time.

In employing this socioeconomic status-based typology to reexamine racial differences in suburbanization I use data from the 1970, 1980, and 1990 U.S. Censuses.⁴ Following long-standing convention (Baldassare 1992; Schnore 1972a), suburbs are defined as metropolitan area places that are not central cities.⁵ I use the metropolitan area, place, and central city boundaries extant at each census to define the suburban population. As a result, intercensal shifts in the suburban population are due to fertility, mortality, residential mobility and the redefinition of geographic units. Given that the goal of this research is to assess racial differences in access to suburbs by suburb socioeconomic status, this approach is preferable to one that employs

⁴ The 1970 data are only available for suburbs with at least 2,500 residents, so analyses in all years are restricted to suburbs with populations above this threshold.

⁵ Places include both incorporated places (e.g., cities, boroughs, towns, and villages) and census designated places. For detailed information on how places, central cities, and metropolitan areas are defined see U.S. Bureau of the Census (1992).

consistent boundaries. When the U.S. Census Bureau redefines metropolitan areas or places their action is designed to reflect changes in the properties of these units. Thus, an analysis that employs consistent geographic boundaries denies that places change over the course of decades.⁶

The 1970 Census data reveal a high degree of correlation between the seven measures that comprise the socioeconomic status index ($\alpha = .89$). Table 1 describes the distribution of this index for 1970 suburbs. Specifically it identifies the index scores that are at the 20th and 80th percentiles of the distribution. Given the way suburb types are defined, these scores are also the cutpoints for the suburb typology. Thus, low suburbs have socioeconomic status index scores less than $-.59$, high suburbs have index scores greater than $.54$, and the remainder of suburbs are middle suburbs. These cutpoints, $-.59$ and $.54$, are again applied to the distribution of socioeconomic status scores in 1980 and 1990 to assign suburb types in those years.

While suburb types are different by definition, it has yet to be shown that these types capture real differences in socioeconomic status. The issue of substantive differences between types is addressed in Tables 2 and 3. Table 2 shows mean characteristics for each of the three suburb types in 1980 and 1990. These numbers make clear that there are indeed substantive differences between low, middle, and high suburbs. In 1990, the poverty rate in low suburbs was 18 percent, while high suburbs had a poverty rate of only 3 percent. Just over 16 percent of low suburb families had a 1989 annual income of at least \$50,000. By contrast, 60 percent of high suburb families had sufficient earnings to qualify as affluent. This pattern of differences by suburb type is apparent for each of the factors shown in Table 2 in both 1980 and 1990. High suburbs are more advantaged than low suburbs by a factor of two on most measures, with their advantage extending to a factor of four or five on such measures as percent poor and percent of adults with a college degree. In addition to the large gaps between suburb types in each year, the means in Table 2 also illustrate increasing heterogeneity among suburbs. Of the nine traits described in Table 2, the gap between low and high suburbs remained fairly constant for three measures and widened for the remaining six. Thus, the means in Table 2 echo much of the recent research on suburbs, indicating that not only are there substantive differences in the socioeconomic status of suburbs, but that suburbs are becoming more dissimilar from one another (Bourne 1996; Frey 1998; Frey and Geverdt 1998; Jackson 1985).

Table 2 supports the argument that suburb types are distinct from one another, but reveals nothing about how suburbs compare to central cities. To provide a sense of the relative socioeconomic status of suburbs I compare them to the central cities in their metropolitan areas. Table 3, which contains the results of this analysis, indicates that not only are low suburbs much less advantaged than high suburbs, but on many indicators they are also less advantaged than nearby central cities. In 1990, 92 percent of low suburbs had a mean family income below that of the central cities in their metropolitan area. Moreover, nearly all low suburbs had a smaller share of affluent families, college attendees, and upper white collar workers than did nearby central cities. As the last row of Table 3 indicates, in 1990 the average low suburb was less advantaged than its central cities on six of the nine indicators of socioeconomic status. By contrast, the average middle suburb was less advantaged on between two and three indicators, while almost no high suburbs were less advantaged than the central cities in their metropolitan area. Table 3 also reveals that not only are low suburbs becoming more dissimilar from high suburbs, but that over the 1980s they increasingly lost their comparative advantage over central cities. In 1980, low suburbs compared least favorably with central cities on percent of adults with a college

⁶ Restricting the sample to those places that are defined as suburbs in both 1980 and 1990 does not substantively change the results of my analysis.

degree and percent of workers in upper white collar occupations. On each of these indicators 88 percent of low suburbs were less advantaged than central cities. By 1990, at least 88 percent of low suburbs were less advantaged than central cities on not two, but five indicators of socioeconomic status.

The analyses presented in Tables 2 and 3 show that not only are suburbs becoming increasingly dissimilar from one another, but that most low suburbs are less advantaged than nearby central cities on multiple indicators of socioeconomic status. It is clear that recent shifts have rendered the central city-suburb dichotomy obsolete. Analyses that continue to treat suburbs as a uniformly advantaged alternative to central cities almost certainly yield results that are difficult, if not impossible, to interpret. One area where this failure to acknowledge heterogeneity among suburbs has likely led to conclusions that are particularly misleading is in the study of racial differences in suburbanization. As has already been discussed, the Thernstroms (1997) observe that the proportion of blacks in the suburbs has grown dramatically in recent decades, using this fact as evidence that like whites, many blacks are now able to live in neighborhoods with few poor residents. In light of evidence that not all suburbs are more advantaged than central cities, I now turn to a reexamination of racial differences in suburbanization. By considering the socioeconomic status of the places where black, white, Latino, and Asian suburbanites live, I am able to assess how the relationship between suburbanization and privilege varies by race, thereby shedding light on assertions made by the Thernstroms and others.

Racial Differences in Suburbanization Revisited

Racial Composition of Suburbs

In reexamining racial differences in suburbanization I begin by comparing the composition of suburbs in 1980 and 1990. Table 4 shows the share of whites, blacks, Asians, and Latinos in metropolitan areas, suburbs, and each suburb type. In addition, the column labeled “ratio” indicates the extent to which racial groups are randomly distributed within metropolitan areas. These ratios are computed by dividing a racial group’s share of the suburbs, or a particular suburb type, by that group’s share of the metropolitan area population. If racial groups were randomly distributed within metropolitan areas then all ratios would be equal to one. Numbers greater than one reflect overrepresentation, while those less than one indicate underrepresentation.

Consistent with the findings of prior studies (e.g., Frey 1996, Jackson 1985), Table 4 reveals white overrepresentation in the suburbs. In 1990, whites were 69 percent of the metropolitan area population, but 79 percent of the suburban population. This represented a slight increase in whites’ suburban advantage over 1980. While whites are overrepresented in the suburbs generally, this pattern does not hold across all suburb types. As the socioeconomic status of suburbs rises, whites’ overrepresentation increases. In fact, whites are actually underrepresented in low suburbs—those suburbs that tend to be less advantaged than neighboring central cities. In 1990, whites share of the low suburb population was only 82 percent of their share of the metropolitan area population. By contrast, whites’ share of the middle and high suburb populations was 119 percent and 130 percent, respectively, of their share of the metropolitan area population. Table 4 also reveals that during the 1980s whites were able to advance their hold on more advantaged suburbs, becoming more underrepresented in low suburbs and more overrepresented in high suburbs.

Unlike whites, African Americans have traditionally been underrepresented in suburbs. In 1980, blacks' share of the suburban population was only 46 percent of their share of the metropolitan area population. While blacks did become less underrepresented in the suburbs over the 1980s, the pace of change was slow. By the end of the decade blacks' share of the suburban population was only 51 percent of what it would have been if people were randomly distributed within metropolitan areas. While blacks are generally underrepresented in the suburbs, they were overrepresented in low suburbs in 1980, and became more overrepresented in these least advantaged suburbs by 1990. That blacks share of low suburbs has been about 30 percent higher than their share of metropolitan area populations is troubling for two reasons. First, as was shown in Tables 2 and 3, these suburbs are particularly disadvantaged, with economic, educational, and occupational profiles that lag behind those of most central cities. As such, it is unclear that residence in low suburbs represents advancement over central city alternatives. Second, the overrepresentation of blacks in low suburbs is in stark contrast to their extreme underrepresentation in middle and high suburbs. In 1990, African Americans were 8 percent of the metropolitan area population, but only 6 percent of the middle suburb population, and a paltry 3 percent of the high suburb population. Thus, Table 4 shows a strong inverse relationship between the socioeconomic status of suburbs and the share of their population that is African American.

The situation of Latinos is similar to that of blacks, though the level of disadvantage is different. Whereas African Americans' share of the suburban population is one-half their share of the metropolitan area population, Latinos are only underrepresented in the suburban population by about 20 percent, a figure that changed little over the 1980s. Like blacks, Latinos are overrepresented in low suburbs and underrepresented in more advantaged suburbs. In 1990, Hispanics represented 12 percent of the metropolitan area population, but 21 percent of the low suburb population. This represents an increase in Latino overrepresentation in low suburbs between 1980 and 1990, growing from 170 percent of their share of the metropolitan area population to 177 percent. Again, this is troubling in light of the characteristics of low suburbs and Latinos' steady underrepresentation in affluent suburbs. Essentially unchanged since 1980, Latinos' share of the middle and high suburb populations was 65 percent and 30 percent, respectively, of what it would be if people were randomly distributed within metropolitan areas.

While Table 4 reveals that black and Latino representation in advantaged suburbs is quite low, the results for Asians are more positive. In 1980, Asians' share of the suburban population was just below their share of the metropolitan area population. Similarly, their shares of the low, middle, and high suburb populations were all about 90 percent of their share of the metropolitan area population. While this profile was certainly more positive than that observed for blacks and Hispanics, it paled in comparison to the distribution Asians enjoyed just 10 years later. By 1990, Asians' share of the suburban population was even closer to their share of the metropolitan area population, and their representation across the three suburb types had come to resemble that of whites. In contrast to blacks and Latinos, Asians were underrepresented in low suburbs, with middle and high suburb shares about equal to their share of the metropolitan area population.

Distribution across Suburb Types

In addition to looking at the racial composition of suburb types, a second way to examine racial differences in suburbanization is to consider the distribution of suburban residents across low, middle, and high suburbs. Table 5 reports the results of this analysis. The suburb typology is defined such that in 1970, 20 percent of suburban residents were in low suburbs, 60 percent were in middle suburbs, and 20 percent were in high suburbs. By 1980, that 20-60-20 pattern had

changed to 18-60-22, indicating a slight shift in the suburban population from low to high suburbs. Over the 1980s there was increasing heterogeneity in the places where suburban residents lived. A smaller fraction of suburbanites lived in middle suburbs, while the fractions living in low and high suburbs each grew. In 1990, nearly 24 percent of suburban residents were in high suburbs.

In both 1980 and 1990 the distribution of suburban residents by suburb type varied substantially by race. Not surprisingly, white suburbanites were the group least likely to be in low suburbs, 13 percent in 1990, and most likely to be in high suburbs, 27 percent in 1990. Again the data show that over the 1980s, an increasing share of white suburbanites lived in the most advantaged suburbs. Between 1980 and 1990, the percentage of white suburban residents in high suburbs increased by 3 percentage points, while the fraction of white suburban residents in middle suburbs fell by a similar amount.

The white distribution across suburb types was rivaled by the distribution of Asians. In 1980, 18 percent of Asian suburbanites were in low suburbs, while 61 percent and 21 percent were in middle and high suburbs, respectively. Over the 1980s the distribution of Asian suburban residents shifted markedly toward more advantaged suburbs, such that by 1990 more than 25 percent of Asian suburban residents lived in high suburbs. This is only slightly less than the 27 percent of white suburban residents who lived in high suburbs.

In contrast to whites and Asians, blacks and Latinos have a more difficult time attaining suburban residence (Frey 1996), and once in the suburbs they are less likely to settle in advantaged communities. In 1980 and 1990, fewer than 10 percent of suburban residents from either group were in high suburbs. Instead, in 1980, 39 percent of Latino suburban residents, and 49 percent of black suburban residents lived in low suburbs. Between 1980 and 1990, distributions of the black and Latino suburban populations converged. The black suburban population shifted slightly from low to middle suburbs, while the Latino suburban population spread from middle suburbs to low and high suburbs. As a result, by 1990 between 40 and 45 percent of the black and Latino suburban populations were in low suburbs, with another 45 to 50 percent of each group living in middle suburbs.

Race versus Class

The above analysis makes clear that there is a relationship between an individual's race and the socioeconomic status of his or her suburb. However, it is not yet clear that this pattern should be attributed to race, rather than to racial differences in social class. It may simply be that whites and Asians are overrepresented in high suburbs because of well-established racial differences in education, income, wealth, and occupational status (Conley 1999; Farley 1996; Oliver and Shapiro 1995). As has been discussed above, Alba and Logan (1993) cast this debate of race versus class as a conflict between place stratification and spatial assimilation hypotheses. The spatial assimilation perspective is an extension of general assimilation theory. It posits that independent of race, as individuals attain more education and acquire greater wealth they convert these resources into more attractive neighborhoods. By contrast, the place stratification hypothesis maintains that locational attainment is a racialized process. With several colleagues, Alba and Logan have repeatedly found racial differences in suburbanization that persist even after controls for socioeconomic status are employed (Alba and Logan 1991; Alba and Logan 1993; Alba, Logan, and Bellair 1994; Logan and Alba 1993; Logan, Alba, Leung 1996; Logan et al. 1996). Below I report the results of an analysis designed to test whether observed racial differences in the distribution of suburban residents across low, middle, and high suburbs also conform to the place stratification hypothesis.

The roles of racial and nonracial factors in determining suburb type are examined with geocoded data from the 1990 Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). The PSID is well-suited to this task because it provides individual, family, and contextual data for a large national sample. The principal drawback of the PSID is that its sample contains few Asians. As a result, my analysis is limited to the 2,357 black, white, and Latino PSID families who lived in the suburbs in 1990. Table 6 shows the distribution of PSID families by race and suburb type. Compared to the population of suburban residents (see Table 5), white and black PSID families are somewhat more likely to be in high suburbs, while Hispanic PSID families are slightly overrepresented in low suburbs.

I use a multinomial logit model to test the spatial assimilation and place stratification hypotheses. Shown in Table 7, this model regresses suburb type on family income, head of household's race and years of schooling, and controls for tenure, age, and region. Income is expressed as an income-to-needs ratio, which is obtained by dividing 1989 family income by the poverty threshold corresponding to each family's size and structure.⁷ Schooling is divided into three categories, no more than a high school diploma, some college, and at least an undergraduate degree.

The results in Table 7 initially support the spatial assimilation hypothesis, as income and education affect suburb type. Compared to a family at the poverty line, families with an annual income that is twice the poverty line are about 1.1 times as likely to live in a middle or high suburb rather than a low suburb. Similarly, families headed by an individual who has attended or completed college are between 2 and 3.6 times as likely to live in a high suburb, as opposed to a low suburb, when compared to families with a less educated head. There is also evidence that income and education are not only important in avoiding the least advantaged suburbs, but in locating in the most advantaged suburbs as well. As a family doubles its income-to-needs ratio, it is 1.02 times as likely to live in a high suburb rather than a middle suburb. More substantively significant effects appear for head's education, where attending college or earning a degree leads to a family being between 1.8 and 2.7 times as likely to live in a high, rather than low, suburb.

While these income and education effects are clearly consistent with a spatial assimilation argument, the race coefficients in Table 7 instead favor the place stratification hypothesis. After controlling for socioeconomic status, age, and region, the probability of living in low, middle, and high suburbs continues to vary by race. Blacks and Latinos remain about one-third as likely as whites to live in middle or high suburbs, as opposed to low suburbs.⁸ Thus, while whites are in part overrepresented in the most advantaged suburbs because they tend to

⁷ Wealth, which varies greatly by race, is not included in the model because few Latino families were asked the relevant series of questions. This is because most PSID Latino families were first interviewed in 1990, while the wealth questions were asked in 1989. A reanalysis of black-white differences in suburb type controlling for wealth yielded similar "black" coefficients to those shown in Table 7.

⁸ There are no statistically significant racial differences in the probability of living in middle suburbs, as opposed to high suburbs, nor are there reliable differences in suburb type between blacks and Latinos. Of course this does not mean that differences do not exist; only that they are not apparent in the PSID data, which suffers from a dearth of black and Latino families in high suburbs. It is possible that a large dataset would reveal a persistent white advantage not only in avoiding the least advantaged suburbs, but also in making the transition from middle to high suburbs.

have high earnings and advanced educations, another reason why whites are so scarce in low suburbs appears to be racial privilege.

Conclusion

Despite clear evidence of increasing heterogeneity among American suburbs, we nevertheless hold on to a romanticized notion of suburbs that was borne in the early part of this century and nurtured in the decades following World War II. That image, which is reflected in the term “suburbia”, refers to a place where crime is low, schools are good, few people are poor, and nearly everyone is white. Such a conception of the suburbs is evident in the media, as well as in public policy and academic discourse. The goal of this paper is to highlight differences between suburbia and the suburbs, and to consider how disaggregating suburbs affects our understanding of racial differences in suburbanization over the 1980s.

My analysis yields three principal conclusions. First, suburbs vary tremendously by socioeconomic status. The typology I define identifies low, middle, and high socioeconomic status suburbs. While high suburbs clearly possess the traits that are routinely associated with suburbs, and even middle suburbs tend to be more advantaged than nearby central cities, the same is not true of low suburbs. These places, which were home to 18 percent of the suburban population in 1990, deviate sharply from the communities portrayed in *Leave it to Beaver*, *Pleasantville*, *Home Improvement*, and other popular depictions of suburbs. In 1990, the average low suburb was less advantaged than nearby central cities on six of nine indicators of socioeconomic status. Low suburbs had a poverty rate that was nearly six times higher than the poverty rate in high suburbs, and 40 percent higher than the U.S. poverty rate. Extreme heterogeneity among suburbs means that knowing whether people live in the central city or suburbs provides little information about their socioeconomic context, and responsible academics and social commentators should stop behaving as if it does. Suburbs do not now conform to the suburban myth, nor have they for several decades (Berger 1972; Schnore 1963, 1964).

Second, there are large differences in the distributions of racial groups across suburb types. In the United States, as well as within each of its regions, there really are two suburban experiences—one for Asians and whites, and another for African Americans and Latinos.⁹ Relatively small shares of the Asian and white suburban populations reside in low suburbs. In 1990, both groups had about 60 percent of their suburban population in middle suburbs and another 25 percent in high suburbs. By contrast, not only do African Americans and Latinos suburbanize at lower rates than whites and Asians (Frey 1996), but when they do find their way to the suburbs, more than 40 percent of blacks and Latinos end up in low suburbs. The overrepresentation of these two groups in the least advantaged suburbs is all the more troubling because both blacks and Hispanics are severely underrepresented in high suburbs. In 1980 and 1990 fewer than 10 percent of black and Latino suburban dwellers were in high suburbs.

Third, consistent with the place stratification hypothesis, I find that observed racial differences in suburb type are not simply manifestations of racial differences in socioeconomic status. Even after controlling for family income and years of schooling, blacks and Latinos are still three times as likely as whites to live in low suburbs as opposed to high suburbs. It appears that whites do not only live in the most affluent suburbs because of their high incomes, but also because of privilege imparted to them by virtue of their skin color. Whether Asians enjoy a similar racial privilege, or are instead overrepresented in the most advantaged suburbs because of high levels of education and income, remains unclear.

⁹ Results tabulated by region are available from the author upon request.

That race effects persist even after controlling for family-level characteristics begs explanation. While I am not able to offer a definitive response, there are two prominent hypotheses that merit discussion. One hypothesis maintains that blacks and Latinos *choose* to live in less advantaged suburbs. This perspective does not argue that members of these groups do not prefer affluent neighbors, low crime, and good schools—they certainly do—but rather acknowledges that socioeconomic status is only one quality of a suburb, and people may also have preferences for other characteristics. The most plausible alternative traits that might motivate blacks and Latinos to avoid advantaged suburbs are racial composition and proximity to the central city. Farley and his colleagues find that blacks avoid affluent communities because they do not want to be racial “pioneers” in white neighborhoods (Farley et al. 1978, 1994). Blacks, especially those who are middle class or above, often encounter subtle and overt discrimination in public spaces, so many may choose to live near other blacks in hopes of reducing their overall level of racial stress (Feagin 1991). Additionally, blacks and Hispanics might be reluctant to move to affluent suburbs because such places tend to be on the periphery of metropolitan areas, and therefore quite distant from the large minority populations and cultural opportunities of central cities. So, while many blacks and Latinos would ideally like to live in the most affluent suburbs, for reasons of race and space some might instead find middle, or even low suburbs, more attractive.

While academics continue to debate the role of black and Latino preferences in patterns of residential mobility (Bobo and Zubrinsky 1996; Clark 1988, 1989; Galster 1988, 1989; Patterson 1997; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 1997), there can be little doubt that housing market discrimination plays a role in the continued concentration of black and Latino suburban residents in the least advantaged suburbs. Yinger (1995) uses data from the 1989 Housing Discrimination Study (HDS) to argue that blacks and Hispanics face discrimination in four aspects of the housing search process—information, treatment, steering, and financing. First, real estate agents provide less information to black and Hispanic clients. In audits, whites were told about twice as many houses as Hispanics, and three times as many properties as African Americans. Second, real estate agents treat blacks and Latinos in a manner that discourages housing searches. Compared to whites, blacks and Hispanics are less likely to be encouraged to call for more information, to receive a follow-up call, or to be seen quickly by realty agents, but more likely to be questioned about their finances. Third, even when they express preferences for high socioeconomic status neighborhoods, blacks and Latinos are frequently steered toward neighborhoods with few white or affluent residents. Fourth, Yinger surveys recent studies of discrimination in the lending market and concludes that black and Latino homebuyers are denied loans at a rate that is over 50% higher than the rate for comparable whites. What makes these findings so powerful is that most are based on audit studies, a methodology that controls for nonracial factors by providing auditors with similar financial portfolios and sending them to meet with the same real estate agents and landlords. As such, it is difficult to argue that differences in the treatment of whites, blacks, and Latinos are anything but racial discrimination. The effect of persistent housing discrimination is that openings in middle and high suburbs are more likely to be filled by whites, while blacks and Latinos are steered towards suburbs that rarely represent a higher socioeconomic status alternative to the central city—places that too often are suburbs in name only.

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Table 1. Distribution of Socioeconomic Status Index,
1970 Suburbs.

Mean	.00
Median	-.07
Standard deviation	.78
20th percentile	-.59
80th percentile	.54
Minimum	-2.93
Maximum	3.76
<u>Number of suburbs</u>	<u>3,063</u>

Table 2. Mean Suburb Characteristics by Suburb Type: 1980 and 1990.

	1980		
	Low	Middle	High
	Suburbs	Suburbs	Suburbs
Percent female-headed families	20.03	13.48	9.17
Percent poor	15.37	7.42	3.63
Percent of housing units owner-occupied	60.63	69.60	79.05
Percent affluent	14.90	26.49	50.79
Percent high school graduates	56.97	70.97	85.12
Percent adults with some college	21.68	31.93	54.30
Percent adults with college degree	8.73	15.31	33.99
Percent upper white collar	16.73	24.69	41.35
Mean family income (\$1996)	\$39,697	\$50,829	\$78,749
	1990		
	Low	Middle	High
	Suburbs	Suburbs	Suburbs
Percent female-headed families	25.18	15.25	9.14
Percent poor	18.26	7.20	3.25
Percent of housing units owner-occupied	56.05	65.85	78.12
Percent affluent	16.60	33.34	60.20
Percent high school graduates	64.55	79.77	90.18
Percent adults with some college	31.62	46.75	67.72
Percent adults with college degree	9.72	19.09	40.63
Percent upper white collar	19.06	29.01	46.39
Mean family income (\$1996)	\$40,272	\$56,711	\$98,177

Table 3. Percentage of Suburbs That Are Less Advantaged Than Their Central City on Selected SES Measures, by Suburb Type: 1980 and 1990.

1980			
	Low Suburbs	Middle Suburbs	High Suburbs
Percent female-headed families	25.73	6.99	4.31
Percent poor	44.14	7.48	3.73
Percent of housing units owner-occupied	19.25	8.97	3.73
Percent affluent	80.54	25.83	0.29
Percent high school graduates	72.38	22.65	0.10
Percent adults with some college	85.77	49.64	0.49
Percent adults with college degree	88.39	56.30	1.86
Percent upper white collar	88.39	52.67	1.47
Mean family income (\$1996)	79.71	24.22	0.20
Mean number of above SES dimensions on which suburb is less advantaged than its central city	5.84	2.55	0.16
1990			
	Low Suburbs	Middle Suburbs	High Suburbs
Percent female-headed families	29.73	3.43	1.09
Percent poor	41.05	1.84	0.08
Percent of housing units owner-occupied	19.11	8.90	2.40
Percent affluent	90.75	23.03	0.62
Percent high school graduates	77.12	17.01	0.31
Percent adults with some college	92.97	43.57	0.85
Percent adults with college degree	96.83	62.11	2.40
Percent upper white collar	96.83	56.63	0.78
Mean family income (\$1996)	91.60	29.03	0.78
Mean number of SES dimensions where suburb is less advantaged than its central city	6.36	2.46	0.09

Table 4. Racial and Ethnic Composition of Metropolitan Areas and Suburbs: 1980 and 1990.

	1980									
	Nonhispanic White		Nonhispanic Black		Asian		Hispanic		Other	
	Percent ^a	Ratio ^b	Percent	Ratio	Percent	Ratio	Percent	Ratio	Percent	Ratio
All Metropolitan Areas	73.76%	-	14.63%	-	2.36%	-	8.78%	-	0.46%	-
All Suburbs	83.99%	1.14	6.67%	.46	2.15%	.91	6.77%	.77	0.41%	.90
Low Suburbs	64.13%	.87	18.10%	1.24	2.16%	.91	14.95%	1.70	0.66%	1.43
Middle Suburbs	86.82%	1.18	4.70%	.32	2.18%	.92	5.88%	.67	0.42%	.92
High Suburbs	92.46%	1.25	2.74%	.19	2.09%	.89	2.53%	.29	0.17%	.38

	1990									
	Nonhispanic White		Nonhispanic Black		Asian		Hispanic		Other	
	Percent ^a	Ratio ^b	Percent	Ratio	Percent	Ratio	Percent	Ratio	Percent	Ratio
All Metropolitan Areas	68.72%	-	14.81%	-	4.17%	-	11.86%	-	0.45%	-
All Suburbs	78.92%	1.15	7.53%	.51	3.99%	.96	9.19%	.78	0.37%	.81
Low Suburbs	56.28%	.82	18.76%	1.27	3.41%	.82	20.96%	1.77	0.59%	1.30
Middle Suburbs	81.95%	1.19	5.84%	.39	4.08%	.98	7.76%	.65	0.38%	.83
High Suburbs	89.05%	1.30	2.97%	.20	4.23%	1.01	3.58%	.30	0.18%	.39

a Percentages identify the proportion of a population that belongs to the given group. They add horizontally to 100.

b Ratios are formed by dividing percentages for suburbs or suburb types by the percentage of the metropolitan area population that belongs to that racial or ethnic group. Numbers greater than one indicate that the group is overrepresented in an area, while numbers below one indicate underrepresentation.

Table 5. Distribution of Suburban Residents by Race, Ethnicity, and Suburb Type: 1980 and 1990.

	1980	1990	1980-1990 change
All Suburban Residents			
in Low Suburbs	17.87%	18.35%	.48%
in Middle Suburbs	60.45%	57.87%	-2.58%
in High Suburbs	21.67%	23.77%	2.10%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	
Nonhispanic Whites			
in Low Suburbs	13.65%	13.09%	-.56%
in Middle Suburbs	62.49%	60.09%	-2.40%
in High Suburbs	23.86%	26.82%	2.96%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	
Nonhispanic Blacks			
in Low Suburbs	48.50%	45.75%	-2.76%
in Middle Suburbs	42.59%	44.89%	2.30%
in High Suburbs	8.91%	9.37%	.46%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	
Asians			
in Low Suburbs	17.90%	15.67%	-2.23%
in Middle Suburbs	61.05%	59.15%	-1.91%
in High Suburbs	21.04%	25.18%	4.14%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	
Hispanics			
in Low Suburbs	39.45%	41.86%	2.41%
in Middle Suburbs	52.46%	48.87%	-3.60%
in High Suburbs	8.09%	9.27%	1.18%
Total	100.00%	100.00%	

Table 6. Distribution of Suburban PSID Families by Race and Suburb Type: 1990.

	Nonhispanic White		Nonhispanic Black		Hispanic	
	Weighted %	Unweighted N	Weighted %	Unweighted N	Weighted %	Unweighted N
Low Suburbs	12.83%	185	41.02%	186	42.32%	285
Middle Suburbs	57.83%	789	43.17%	178	48.89%	311
High Suburbs	29.34%	369	15.81%	28	8.79%	26
All Suburbs	100.00%	1,343	100.00%	392	100.00%	622

Table 7. Multinomial Logit Regression of Suburb Type on Family Traits: 1990 PSID Suburban Families.

	Middle Suburb vs. Low Suburb			High Suburb vs. Low Suburb		
	Coefficient	Std Err	Odds	Coefficient	Std Err	Odds
Race of household head:						
Nonhispanic white (omitted)						
Hispanic	-1.02 **	0.20	0.36	-1.18 *	0.46	0.31
Nonhispanic black	-1.27 **	0.23	0.28	-0.86 *	0.38	0.42
Tenure:						
Renter (omitted)						
Homeowner	-0.33	0.17	0.72	-0.25	0.22	0.78
Income to needs ratio	0.08 **	0.02	1.08 +	0.10 **	0.02	1.11
Head's schooling:						
HS or less (omitted)						
Some college	0.14	0.18	1.15 ++	0.72 **	0.23	2.06
College degree or more	0.31	0.30	1.36 ++	1.29 **	0.31	3.63
Age	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Region:						
South (omitted)						
West	-0.29	0.21	0.75 ++	-0.88 **	0.28	0.42
Midwest	0.19	0.25	1.21 ++	0.84 **	0.28	2.31
Northeast	-0.01	0.23	0.99 ++	0.70 **	0.26	2.01
Constant	0.79 **	0.26	2.21	-1.63 **	0.35	0.20
Log Likelihood			-1962.64			
Model X^2			274.62			
Pseudo R^2			0.14			
df			20			
N			2,357			

Statistical significance of coefficient: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Comparison of middle and high suburb coefficients: + $p < .05$, ++ $p < .01$