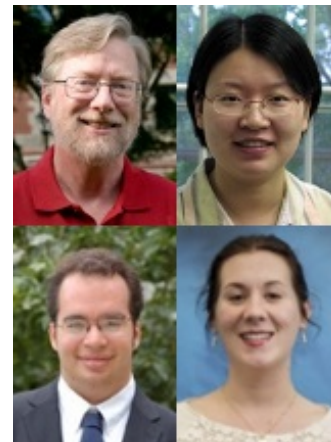


The seeds of the Black ghetto were sown in the 1880s, long before the Great Migration.

*More than a year after the tragic shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri by a white police officer, the influence and legacy of historic racial segregation still looms large in the US. In new research, **John R. Logan**, **Weiwei Zhang**, **Richard Turner**, and **Allison Shertzer** argue that the process of black ghettoization in Northern cities has roots in the 1880s – much farther back than has been previously thought. Making use of census data covering smaller areas than traditional census tracts, they find that 'embryonic ghettos' were present in many cities more than 50 years before the Great Migration, helping to make possible the extreme form of the ghetto that existed in 1940 and beyond.*

Were black ghettos a product of white reaction to the Great Migration in the 1920s and 1930s, or did the ghettoization process have earlier roots? In a recent study, we take advantage of newly available data on black and white residential patterns in several major Northern cities from 1880 to 1940. To investigate the ghettoization process, we use geographic areas smaller than contemporary census tracts to trace the growth of black populations in each city and trends in the level of isolation and segregation, and then analyze which blacks lived in neighborhoods with higher black concentrations. We find that the development of ghettos in an embryonic form was well underway in 1880, that segregation became intense prior to the Great Migration and that in this whole period blacks were segregated based on race rather than class or Southern origin.

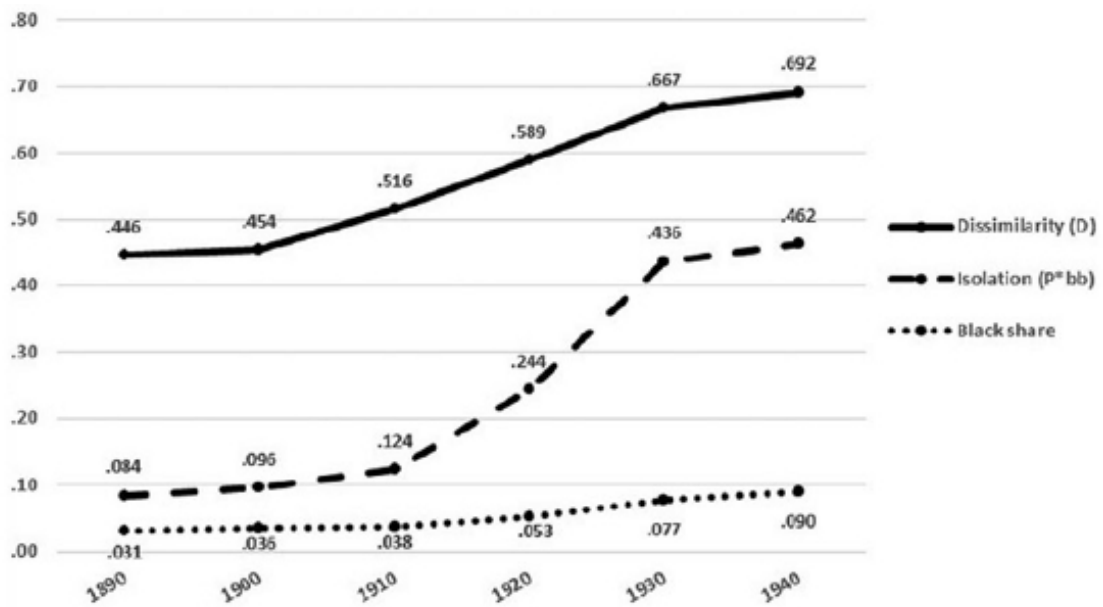


City trends in segregation and isolation, 1880-1940

Blacks were present in small numbers in Northern cities throughout the 19th Century. Most past research agrees on several points: the black population grew appreciably after World War I, blacks in the North were initially mainly of Northern origin but later included much larger shares of Southern-born migrants, and ghettos were only “embryonic” prior to World War I. After that segregation and racial isolation spiked in response to the Great Migration. Our analyses offer some new insights into these conclusions.

In Figure 1 we present the decade-by-decade trends for several Northern cities of the most widely used measures of residential segregation (the Index of Dissimilarity, D), using neighborhood data at the level of enumeration districts (EDs); areas with 200-2500 residents, smaller than census tracts today. Note that the average black person lived in a city with an ED-based value of D close to 60 as early as 1880. In 1910 it was above 70, and it approached 90 in 1940. By this measure segregation of blacks was always high, even when less than 5 percent of city residents were black. This is a very different conclusion than has been reached in prior studies using ward data. There was variation among cities, to be sure. Segregation was consistently lowest in Pittsburgh than in the other cities, and most extreme in Chicago. However, of these two cities Pittsburgh always had a larger share of black residents.

Figure 1 – Trend in Index of Dissimilarity, 1880-1940



There was also a clear evolution in the spatial pattern of predominantly black areas, as displayed in [our figures](#) which map the black settlement pattern in all of these cities. Maps are shown for enumeration districts in 1880-1930 and for census tracts in 1940. These maps have a common feature – the main areas of black settlement expand over time. For example, as shown in Figure 2, in St. Louis in 1880 when D was below .50 and the black population was less than 6 percent, segregation was visible in the contrast between EDs with virtually no black residents and those at 10 percent or 20 percent black. In 1900 several EDs that were more than 70 percent black appear, and the metaphor of “embryonic ghetto” seems useful to describe this case. In each subsequent decade this predominantly black zone expands and slowly spreads, to the point that by 1940 a majority of census tracts are nearly all white, while the zone of black settlement has clearly solidified.

Figure 2 – Segregation in St. Louis, 1880 – 1940

Distribution of Black Population: St. Louis 1880 (Enumeration District)

Predicting variation across cities

Though we see similar trends across [all ten cities](#), there is also considerable variation among them. Can this variation shed light on the sources of segregation? We used multivariate models to predict a city's value of D in a given decade (so there are 60 cases, 6 time points for each of 10 cities), using a variety of predictors, including time, the black share of the population, the class position of whites and blacks, and the percentage of adult blacks (age 18 and above) who were born in Southern states.

Using our model, which controls for the three city characteristics we find that the Index of Dissimilarity rose by 30 points between 1880 and 1940. Dissimilarity was not affected by variation in black population share or by the share of Southerners in the city's black population. And although the ratio of black to white average socioeconomic index (SEI) had a highly significant effect, it was in the opposite direction of the prediction from market and assimilation theory. Where blacks in a city were closer to whites in SEI, they were more separated.

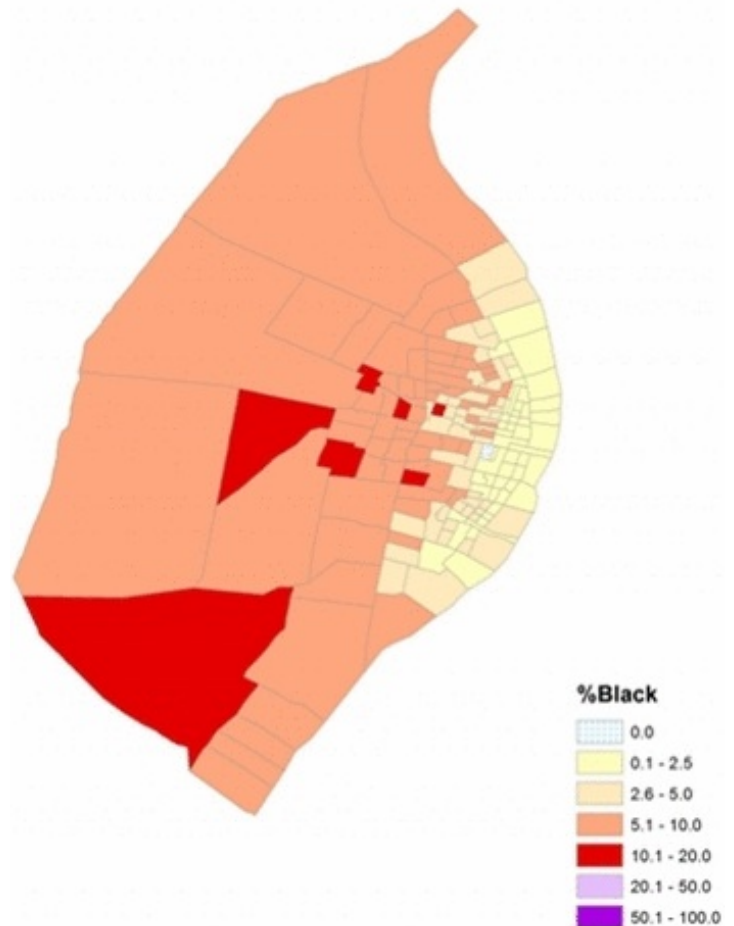
How individual background translates into locational outcomes

Aside from city variations, we can learn more about the processes underlying segregation by investigating which black residents lived in more or less segregated neighborhoods (that is, neighborhoods with a higher share of black neighbors). We tackle this question in a series of models where we have individual-level data on where black people lived, and their demographic characteristics. Our models show that city-level predictors are the dominant factors in the nature of black people's neighborhoods. Most of the variance explained by the models is between cities, and a smaller share is within cities. If one lives in a city with a larger black population that is more highly segregated, one will live in a neighborhood with a larger share of black neighbors.

At the individual level, Southern birth has a negative effect in 1880, and it is not a significant factor until it emerges in both 1930 and 1940 as a significant predictor. In these decades blacks born in the South lived in neighborhoods that were three to five percent higher in black share. We cannot explain why this effect varies over time. It does not seem to be associated with a spike in the Southern share. There are only two cities (Cleveland and Detroit) where the Southern share was quite modest in early decades (20-40 percent in 1880-1910) and much higher subsequently (60-75 percent in 1920-1940, though actually declining between 1930 and 1940). Possibly there was a shift in the composition of black migrants that is not associated with other variables in the model.

Almost by definition, live-in domestic servants in 1880 lived on average in less black neighborhoods. Black owners (around 10 percent of the total) did also. However some other human capital measures worked in the opposite direction: literacy (in 1910, 1930, and 1940) and occupational SEI (in 1900 and 1930) were positively related to living in areas with larger black shares. We advise caution in interpreting the SEI effect because it appears only in two years. It is possible that blacks with certain kinds of higher status occupations who served black clients were especially likely to live in black neighborhoods.

Black separation started earlier than previously thought.



Overall, we find that black separation from whites in Northern cities was much greater and appeared much earlier than has previously been documented. If segregation was imposed on blacks because they posed a threat to whites, then they must have already been threatening when they were only 2 percent or 3 percent of the population. The Index of Dissimilarity was in the high range in several cities studied here in 1880, and the average value was in this range by 1900. Black isolation was much higher at the district level than at the ward level throughout this period – the average city was only 3 percent black in 1880 but the average black person lived in a neighborhood that was 15 percent black, a figure that is greatly out of proportion.

Isolation is a function of both segregation (appropriately measured by the Index of Dissimilarity) and the size of the black population. As both of these factors rose over time, isolation skyrocketed. For those who consider the central fact of ghettoization to be the creation of zone of the city that is predominantly black, it is unlikely that ghettos could have formed to such a degree except for the Great Migration. But if segregation had not also been high and rising, black population growth could not have created the ghetto.

We have also argued that the processes underlying segregation are key to the concept of ghettoization. What distinguishes the ghetto is not its size or homogeneity but rather the process of race-based exclusion. In our modelling, we find little evidence that racial separation was due to human capital deficiencies of black residents in terms of either low class standing or Southern migrant origin. In the city-level analysis the share of Southern blacks proved to be unrelated to Dissimilarity and Isolation, and cities where blacks' occupational level was closer to that of whites had higher separation. In the individual-level analysis the results are mixed; there is no evidence of a Southern migrant disadvantage through 1920, but in both 1930 and 1940 Southerners lived in neighborhoods with higher black shares. The relatively few blacks who owned their own homes lived in neighborhoods with smaller black shares, but literacy and higher a higher socioeconomic index were associated with living in neighborhoods with larger shares of black neighbors.

These within-city effects should not be overstated, and we draw the more general conclusion that individual variation among blacks had minimal impact on where they lived. Blacks lived in black neighborhoods because of their race, and this was already the case in 1880. Scholars have pointed to a number of conditions specific to the period after World War I as the causes of segregation: the wave of bombings in Chicago in the 1920s, the creation of racial covenants in housing, redlining by federal officials, and exclusion of blacks from most early housing subdivisions outside the urban core. Our results suggest that in fact the roots of the ghetto have to be found much earlier. These mechanisms did not originate the ghetto; rather they supplemented the strong boundaries that were already in place by 1880 or 1900. They facilitated and accentuated segregation, making possible the extreme form of the ghetto that existed in 1940 and beyond.

This article is based on the paper, 'Creating the Black Ghetto: Black Residential Patterns before and during the Great Migration', in The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science.

Featured image credit: By Jacob Lawrence, 1917-2000, Artist (NARA record: 1981548) (U.S. National Archives and Records Administration) [Public domain], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1Pz8oPC>

About the authors

John R. Logan – *Brown University*

John R. Logan is Professor of Sociology and Director of the S4 initiative. He came to Brown University in Fall 2004, after 24 years at the University at Albany, where he served as Chair of the Department of Sociology, Director of the Lewis Mumford Center, and Director of the Center for Social and Demographic Analysis. Dr. Logan is co-author, along with Harvey Molotch, of *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place*. His most recent edited book, *Urban China in Transition*, was published by Blackwell in 2007.



Weiwei Zhang – *Brown University*

Weiwei Zhang is a PhD student in Sociology at Brown University. Her research interests include measurements of assessing out-migrations, racial/ethnic disparities in health, successful aging with a particular interest in healthy life expectancy and cognitive functioning at old ages.



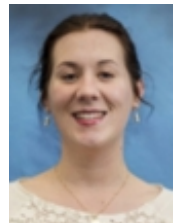
Richard Turner – *Mississippi State University*

Richard Turner earned his PhD at Cornell University, and then served as a postdoctoral research associate at Brown University. He is now a research scientist at the National Strategic Planning & Analysis Research Center at Mississippi State University.



Allison Shertzer – *University of Pittsburgh*

Allison Shertzer is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Pittsburgh. Her research interests include Economic History, Public Economics, and Urban Economics.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP