

# Where We Live Now

IMMIGRATION AND RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

JOHN ICELAND



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in the United States*

John Iceland



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## CHAPTER I

# Introduction

Racial and ethnic diversity is a fact of life in a growing number of American cities and communities. A short twenty-minute ride (depending on the traffic!) along Fort Hamilton Parkway in Brooklyn, New York—where some of my family lives—illustrates this. Along some portions of the trip one can catch sight of a significant number of Chinese-owned stores; in others one sees Orthodox Jews going about their business in traditional black attire; and in yet others different ethnic groups appear to work and reside. For example, in one of the neighborhoods that abuts the parkway, 47 percent of the residents are foreign-born. Of that 47 percent, 40 percent are from Europe, 36 percent from Asia, 20 percent from Latin America, and the rest from other countries, mainly Canada and Australia.<sup>1</sup>

New York City has been a traditional immigrant destination. Recently, however, neighborhoods in other cities have emerged as immigrant destinations as well. In the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of Washington, D.C., Salvadoran immigrants live adjacent to African Americans and whites, with sections of the neighborhood occupied by all groups. Silver Spring, Maryland—just outside of the Washington, D.C., limits,

where I resided until recently—is also a mixing bowl: close to 40 percent of the population is non-Hispanic white, with blacks, Asians, and Hispanics well represented among the rest.<sup>2</sup>

Although immigrants remain relatively concentrated in certain areas, such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and New York City, racial and ethnic concentrations declined in the 1990s and 2000s, and diversity has increased in most parts of the United States.<sup>3</sup> For instance, states such as Georgia and North Carolina, which certainly do not have reputations as immigrant destinations, were in the top ten among states with the highest net increase in immigrant residents between 2000 and 2003, with each receiving more than 100,000 in that period.<sup>4</sup>

To a cosmopolitan person, the increasing diversity of many American metropolitan areas may be a source of stimulation. It can afford the opportunity to eat a variety of foods, observe different customs, and share in others' celebrations, such as Cinco de Mayo or Chinese New Year. With these opportunities, however, also comes the potential for conflict. Groups often compete for scarce local resources, such as municipal jobs or funds for community organizations and activities. Cultural and political differences can lead to clashing viewpoints.

A Newark, New Jersey, newspaper ran an article in 2006 on the vast demographic changes in northern New Jersey. "At the start of this decade," wrote the *Star Ledger*, "northern New Jersey was one of the most diverse, yet one of the most segregated, regions of the country, according to demographic studies. As it becomes even more diverse, sociologists and others are watching to see if it becomes more integrated residentially—or whether segregation persists."<sup>5</sup> The article goes on to tell the stories of several residents. For example, after a divorce Maria Guareno, a physical therapist from Colombia, moved to Wharton, New Jersey (where her cousin already lived) with two children. The article quotes her daughter, Paola, a senior at Morris Hills High School, who says she likes school but often feels socially isolated: "I don't fit in with the white kids because I'm Spanish, but I don't fit in with a lot of the Spanish kids because I speak English." The Guarenos add that although

they haven't faced any overt discrimination, they sometimes sense the distrustful stares of store merchants and non-Latino neighbors.

Roger Smith, an African American, moved his family from Newark to Union Township in 2002. Smith is a youth worker for a nonprofit agency in Essex County. "The education I got growing up wasn't the best," he told the paper. "That's why we moved to Union. . . . I wanted a multiracial community. . . . In Union, everybody is getting along with each other. Neighbors talk to each other. You won't find neighborhoods dominated by one ethnic group anymore. Them days are winding down." His daughter, who is in second grade, has Indian, Brazilian, African, and African American classmates. Smith added, "It's an amazing sight to see, and the best part is, you see them all getting along with each other."

One of the central goals of this book is to examine whether neighborhood-level segregation persists and what role immigration is playing in changing residential patterns in the United States. In general, it is unsurprising that different racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups often display distinct residential patterns. Some forms of segregation may be quite benign, because people of similar backgrounds often prefer to live near each other. Nevertheless, high levels of segregation, particularly if resulting from discrimination, can exacerbate racial and ethnic inequality. Historically, high levels of black-white segregation served to limit the residential choices of African Americans as well as constrain their economic and educational opportunities. This situation led many people to support the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* finding, which invalidated "separate but equal" treatment.

A number of studies have shown that during the past few decades there have been moderate declines in black-white residential segregation in U.S. metropolitan areas.<sup>6</sup> However, this has been accompanied by small increases in the segregation of Asians and Hispanics from whites. What explains these patterns? On the one hand, we might expect that in the post-1960s civil rights era, racial and ethnic polarization would decline for all groups. On the other hand, some have argued

that continued high levels of immigration bolster Hispanic and Asian ethnic enclaves, in part because of the immigration process itself and also as a result of socioeconomic differences between the foreign-born newcomers and the native-born white population.

This book delves into these issues by examining how immigration has reshaped the metropolitan landscape and how the interplay between the racial, ethnic, and class composition of both the native and immigrant populations further molds residential patterns. Much of the analysis is based on my own examination of data from multiple decennial censuses and other household surveys. I also review and incorporate findings from other studies on these issues. The Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is at times invoked as a case study, as it embodies recent ongoing social processes, such as population growth via immigration and momentous changes in racial, ethnic, and class diversity.

In short, the questions tackled in the following chapters are: Is there evidence that immigrants are becoming residentially assimilated? Does the incorporation process look different for immigrants of different racial and ethnic backgrounds? How do other characteristics of immigrants, such as English-language ability and socioeconomic standing, affect the extent of residential segregation? What has been the impact of immigration on the segregation patterns of native-born blacks and whites? How stable are diverse neighborhoods, and what is the quality of group relations in diverse areas?

In this book I show that immigrant groups and their descendants are by and large becoming residentially assimilated in American metropolitan areas. For example, native-born Hispanics, Asians, and blacks are all less segregated from whites than are the foreign-born of these groups. Immigrants who have been in the United States for a longer period of time are also generally less segregated from other groups than new arrivals. Socioeconomic differences play an important role in explaining these patterns and trends for all racial and ethnic groups—especially for Hispanics and Asians. Those of higher socioeconomic status are substantially less segregated from whites than lower-socio-

economic-status individuals. Over time we may see greater integration if members of these groups move up the socioeconomic ladder in the coming years.

A second finding is that in many cases we see *multiple* forms of assimilation and incorporation. For example, some analyses in this book indicate that native-born Hispanics are less segregated from both Anglos *and* African Americans than foreign-born Hispanics. Moreover, Hispanic race groups also show particularly low levels of segregation from native-born Hispanics not of their own race, indicating the salience of pan-Hispanic identity across country of origin and also self-identified race groups. In diverse societies, it is important to recognize that different immigrant groups can become integrated with multiple other groups.

A third finding is that extent and pace of spatial assimilation among immigrants are nevertheless still substantially shaped by race and ethnicity. For example, levels of segregation from native-born non-Hispanic whites are highest among black immigrants and lowest among white immigrants. Hispanic and Asian immigrants fall in between. Moreover, "assimilation" does not always suggest the same process for all groups. For example, among racially diverse Hispanic immigrants, those who identify themselves as "white" or "other" race are considerably less segregated from non-Hispanic whites than those who report being "black." Conversely, for black Hispanic immigrants, assimilation may mean slight declines in segregation from whites over time and across generations, but even larger declines in segregation from non-Hispanic blacks. In fact, the very high overall levels of segregation between Anglos and black Hispanics and black immigrants more generally to a large extent overshadow the slight generational convergence. Some of the findings herein are thus as consistent with the *segmented assimilation* perspective (described in more detail in chapter 2) as with spatial assimilation. In other words, immigrant groups to some extent experience divergent patterns of incorporation in the United States depending on their race and ethnicity.



These findings have implications for racial stratification in the United States. They suggest that we may see racial and ethnic boundary “blurring” or “shifting” among some groups in the coming years. Boundary blurring refers to a process by which the social boundary between groups becomes less distinct over time. This occurs when there is frequent contact, such as daily interactions and, ultimately, intermarriage between groups. If such contact occurs on a large enough scale, boundaries can shift, where a population once on one side of a boundary moves to the other.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely what occurred among many immigrant groups from southern and eastern Europe in the early twentieth century. At the time of their entry, such immigrants were considered racially distinct from the native-born white population (which was largely from northern and western Europe) but over time became accepted as whites.<sup>8</sup> In this book, I provide evidence of boundary blurring, especially between some non-black Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites. Segregation between whites and Asians is also moderate, and patterns observed are generally consistent with residential assimilation.

Interestingly, the growing diversity in metropolitan America, fueled by immigration, has had important implications for the most rigid of color lines—that between whites and blacks. In the last major book on residential segregation, *American Apartheid* (1993), Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton effectively argued how the problem of the twentieth century was indeed, as foreseen by W.E.B. Du Bois at the dawn of the century, that of the color line.<sup>9</sup> Massey and Denton documented how the extremely high levels of residential segregation between whites and blacks (which they termed “hypersegregation”) were reinforced by racism and discrimination in the real-estate industry, banking institutions, and the everyday acts of individuals. One of the themes in my book, however, is that—in concert with broader political, economic, and cultural shifts—immigration has softened the black-white divide. In particular, black segregation from other groups, including whites, tends to be lower in multiethnic metropolitan areas. Although the rea-