
Ray Sin and Maria Krysan

Abstract

In the past two decades, there has been a sharp increase in the number of studies on racial residential integration. However, there is a fair amount of disagreement in this work about how to conceptualize integration and how to operationalize it in research. We conduct a research synthesis of published research from 1950 to 2013 to uncover (1) how scholars have defined integration, (2) how scholars have measured integration, and (3) which ethnic/racial groups are integrating with whom. We have three key findings. First, the definition of integration moved away from being a multidimensional concept—involving both racial mixing in neighborhoods and cross-racial interactions—to solely referring to the racial composition. Second, the measurement of integration varies tremendously across time. Third, although the combination of ethnic/racial groups has expanded from Whites and Blacks sharing a residential space to include other groups such as Asians and Hispanics, these differences are often not made explicit. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings.

Keywords

residential integration, housing, research synthesis, race relations, racial inequality, neighborhoods

INTRODUCTION

A 2012 report published by the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research proclaimed the end of segregation (Glaeser and Vigdor 2012). One criticism of the report was that it was misleading because integration was operationalized as the degree to which Blacks live apart from non-Blacks—a catch-all category comprising Whites, Asians, and Hispanics (Alba and Romalewski 2012). Glaeser and Vigdor, it was argued, therefore glossed over the fact that the decline in Black segregation is largely brought about by the corresponding increase in Blacks sharing residential space with Hispanics and/or Asians. Consequently, majority-minority neighborhoods are treated as integrated. In short, the magnitude of the declines in black segregation—and whether segregation is, in fact, dead, hinges on the definition of integration.

Our goal is not to contribute to this conversation about whether and how much segregation has decreased but instead to use the debate to illustrate the problem created by a lack of specificity in what is meant by integration—a lack of specificity that extends beyond the debate surrounding Glaeser and Vigdor’s (2012) report. We track published social science research on residential integration over the past 60 or so years to document three things: (1) how integration has been defined, (2) how it is measured, and (3) which racial/ethnic groups are integrating with whom. Based on this systematic review, we make three key observations: (1) The definition of integration has slowly moved away from a multidimensional concept encompassing both racial mixing in residences and

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Feature Review

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social integration to being identified solely in terms of racial composition, (2) how integration is measured varies tremendously across time, and (3) the combination of racial/ethnic groups in integrated neighborhoods has expanded from consisting of only White and Black residents to consisting of a variety of other combinations such as Black-Other and multiracial/ethnic.

**METHODOLOGY**

We identified all scholarship on residential integration that was published in English between 1950 and 2013 by searching three databases (Academic Search Premier, Google Scholar, and JStor). Our keywords were “housing integration,” “racial diversity,” “racially diverse neighborhood,” “integrated neighborhood,” and “racial integration.” This yielded 113 articles and books that looked at racially integrated neighborhoods in a meaningful way. We also included studies that focus on segregation but nevertheless included racially integrated neighborhoods in the analysis—even if only as a “residual” category. Additionally, we used the “cited by” function in Google Scholar to trace published studies that may be relevant but were not uncovered by our keyword search. We excluded studies that do not provide empirical analyses of housing integration in a substantive way. To take one example, Galster (1999) analyzes how the Fair Housing Act contributed to the attenuation of racial discrimination in housing, which led to the emergence of stable, racially diverse neighborhoods. Since it was a social history of open housing laws and residential integration was not a unit of analysis even if only as a “residual” category. Nonetheless, we used the cited by function in Google Scholar to trace published studies that may be relevant but were not uncovered by our keyword search. We excluded studies that do not provide empirical analyses of housing integration in a substantive way.

We present our analysis using two-decade intervals (which we refer to as “waves”). Our timeline begins in 1950 because the first published research on housing integration we found was in 1951. The number of studies on housing integration was less than 20 in each of the first two waves (1950–1969; 1970–1989). However, between wave II and wave III (1990–2013), there was a fourfold increase from 19 to 77 publications.

**DEFINING INTEGRATION**

The first dimension we consider is the question of how integration is defined. We identify two key ways: Either it is conceptualized exclusively as a numerical definition or else it is seen as multidimensional. There is a third residual category for completeness. Studies that conceptualize integration in terms of the numbers view an integrated neighborhood as one in which there is some level of racial heterogeneity. In contrast, studies that treat integration as multidimensional pay attention to social interaction between people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, in addition to a place’s racial composition. The residual category is a small group of studies that focus on integration but fail to specifically define it; they tend to be review papers summarizing the literature.

Figure 1 shows that there is a clear shift in the definition of integration used in published research. In wave I, 70 percent define integration as multidimensional. However, this attenuated by wave II to about 60 percent before declining precipitously to about 20 percent in wave III. Nearly 80 percent of articles in wave III focus on the numbers alone when talking about integration.

Part of the explanation for this change from multidimensional to numeric integration is likely the expansion of desktop computing and the Internet, which facilitates large-scale dataset analyses. Early studies that define integration as multidimensional administered surveys to residents living in location-specific integrated housing and gathered information, for example, about the frequency of social interactions with other-race neighbors. By waves II and III, particularly from the 1980s onward, studies relied almost exclusively on census data to determine how many integrated neighborhoods there were and if they remain integrated over time. An advantage is that the results are not limited to a single city or housing project. On the other hand, a benefit in studying housing integration specifically in one location—in other words, relying on case studies—is the ability to have a more comprehensive...
definition of integration that includes assessments of actual social interactions. For example, Merton, West, and Jahoda’s (1951) survey interview study of an East Coast housing project found that living in integrated housing has different meanings for Whites and Blacks. Whites framed residential integration as a step toward racial equality, while Blacks saw integration, particularly through government fiat, as an affirmation of the American Creed, bridging the promise and practice of formal equality. Interestingly, in wave III, there are the early signs of a revival in understanding the lived experiences of integration, using qualitative methods (e.g., Burke 2012; Eisenstadt 2010).

MEASURING INTEGRATION

We turn now to the related question of how integration is measured. We uncovered three approaches: (1) absolute, (2) comparative, and (3) both absolute and comparative. The absolute approach uses a predetermined cutoff level or range within which a place must fall in order to be called “integrated” (e.g., 10–89 percent Black). The comparative approach assesses the extent to which the racial composition of a smaller geographic level (such as census tracts) resembles the racial distribution of a broader reference category (such as the city in which it is embedded). Although these broader reference categories range from cities/metropolitan areas to the nation, most studies use the former. A small number of studies used both absolute and comparative approaches. Finally, studies lacking information about measurement and summaries of the literature are categorized as “unclear.” Figure 2 presents the percentage of studies using each approach, by wave.

There is no consensus among the absolute studies as to what cutoffs to use (Galster 1998). Some (older studies) used an absolute number such as one or two Black families (Zeul and Humphrey 1971), while others use a range such as 10 to 89 percent Black (Lee and Wood 1990) or 30 to 70 percent Black (Quillian 2002). Ellen (2000) provides one of the more detailed justifications for her approach. She puts the upper limit of the Black population in White-Black integration at 50 percent because Blacks constitute about 12 percent of the nation’s population and 13 percent of all metropolitan areas. She maintains that majority-Black neighborhoods may be misidentified as White-Black integration if we extend the upper limit to greater than 50 percent Black.

The comparative approach rejects using cutoffs because racial minorities are not evenly distributed across the country. If integrated neighborhoods have to be at least 25 percent minority, cities that are only 10 percent minority cannot be integrated, even if every single racial minority resident lives side by side with Whites. The comparative approach avoids this by identifying integrated neighborhoods as places whose racial composition resembles that of the larger geographical unit in which they are nested. Hence, in cities with only 10 percent racial minorities, neighborhoods that have 10 percent racial minority are integrated. Maly (2000) argues for this approach because how integration is perceived and experienced varies, and these differences are contingent upon the broader geographic context.

The comparative approach appears mainly in wave III. Sixty percent of the comparative approach studies relied on the degree to which neighborhood
racial composition resembles that of the larger metro area. The rest used statistical indices (e.g., Dissimilarity Index, Neighborhood Diversity Index, and Entropy Index) and of them, the Entropy Index is the most commonly used, at 20 percent.1

The main critique of the absolute approach is that it is arbitrary, and this criticism is certainly borne out in the research synthesis. There is very little agreement about which “absolute” number signals integration, and this variability makes comparisons across studies difficult (Smith 1998). To illustrate this, we look specifically at the cutoffs used in analyses of Black/White integration from 1950 to 2013. Given that so many studies use a range, it is not straightforward to group them together, so we used a two-step process. First, we combined studies that measure housing integration as neighborhoods with one to two Black families with those that are 8 percent Black under the broad category “greater than 0 percent but less than or equal to 10 percent Black.” Second, we use upper limits as a way to separate those whose range overlaps to some degree. Researchers who measure White-Black integration as having 45 to 55 percent Black are placed in the 10 to 60 percent category while those that are 34 to 81 percent Black are grouped in 10 to 89 percent category. We created an “other” category to include approaches that could not be easily collapsed and/or were infrequently used (as is true for other themes, we omitted review or summary articles). The summary of the diversity of measurement approaches for White-Black integration is presented in Table 1.

The results from Table 1 show not only that are there many ways White-Black integration is measured but that the dominant approach has changed over time. From 1950 to 1969, about half of all studies measure White-Black integration as having greater than 0 but less than or equal to 10 percent Black or communities that consists of 10 to 60 percent Black. However, from 1970 to 1989, using 10 to 60 percent Black to measure White-Black integration decreased substantially to about 15 percent. From the start of 1990 onward, slightly more than half of published research measured White-Black integration as places with 10 to 60 percent Black and about 36 percent use 10 to 89 percent Black. None of the measurements were consistently the dominant approach in the past 60 years or so.

The problem of the arbitrariness in measuring integration extends beyond White-Black integration.2

Table 1. Measurements of Black-White Residential Integration in Published Research from 1950 to 2013 (in Percentages).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Absolute Approach</th>
<th>Wave</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt;0% but ≤10% Black</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–89% Black</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–60% Black</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>14</td>
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multiethnic/racial neighborhoods were equally numerous and seemingly arbitrary. Out of 17 such studies, almost half measured them as places that were 40 percent or more White, at least 10 percent Black, and at least 10 percent other minority race. The remaining 60 percent were a dizzying array where each study used a different metric such as each group greater than 10 percent, at least 100 persons in the group, and so on.

The arbitrariness of the absolute approach in measuring integration does not mean that the comparative approach is without problems. It is ill fitting to call a neighborhood integrated if one ethnoracial group vastly outnumbers the rest, even if the racial composition of the neighborhood is similar to that of the broader spatial unit (Ellen 2000). We take Saltman’s (1990) ethnographic study of 15 White-Black integrated communities as an example. Saltman measured integration as neighborhoods with some level of racial mixture that resembles the metropolitan area in which the community is embedded. The racial breakdown of all the integrated neighborhoods she studies ranges from places with 35 percent Black to places as high as 81 percent Black; the question becomes, are 81 percent Black neighborhoods comparable to 35 percent Black neighborhoods? Our point is not to criticize Saltman but to highlight that the comparative approach can be as arbitrary as the absolute one. And both lack clear discussion and conceptualization.

A few studies in wave III (about 5 percent) use both approaches, perhaps as a way to circumvent the limitations inherent in each approach. At the core of measuring integration in these studies is a need to balance meaningful racial mixture at the neighborhood level with some connection to the broader racial context. To that end, Lee, Iceland, and Farrell (2013) argue that there are two dimensions to diversity in integrated neighborhoods. First is the magnitude of diversity that can be estimated using indices such as the Entropy Index. The second is the racial-ethnic structure of diversity that takes into account racial composition. They advocate using the majority rule where no group achieves more than 50 percent. Thus far, only a handful of studies adopt both comparative and absolute approaches.

WHICH COMBINATIONS OF RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS ARE BEING INTEGRATED?

Another striking shift in published research on integration is the question of who is integrating with whom? We organized articles into three approaches to this question: White/Black integration, other two-group integration (for example, White/non-White), and multiethnic/racial neighborhoods. There are some publications, particularly those using the comparative approach, where it is unclear what type of integration is under study. In those circumstances, we look at the descriptive statistics to make an assessment. For example, Eschback et al. (1998) identify Houston Heights, Texas, as racially integrated. The racial demographics show that Houston Heights is a White-Hispanic integrated neighborhood, since it comprises 53 percent Hispanics, 43 percent Whites, and 4 percent Blacks. In our classification system we call this an “other two-group” integrated neighborhood. There are three studies that remain unclear because the descriptive statistics were either not provided or not detailed enough to make a judgment. Those are excluded from Figure 3.

In waves I and II, almost all of the studies are concerned with Black-White integration. The two studies that characterize integrated neighborhoods as Whites and “non-Whites” acknowledge that the non-White population is composed almost entirely of Blacks. In essence, and perhaps not surprisingly given the demographics of our nation in the 1950s to 1970s, integration was a Black and White issue. Nevertheless, in wave II there is the first example of a study that views integration as involving more than two groups—and more than just Blacks and Whites. Merry’s (1980) ethnographic study of a majority-minority public housing development consists of 12 percent White, 27 percent Black, 52 percent Chinese, and 6 percent Hispanic.

Between waves II and III there is a dramatic change: the percentage looking at multiethnic/racial integration increased from 5 percent to 44 percent. This rapid increase in studies of multiethnic/racial integration reflects immigration trends since scholars are interested in examining the rapidly growing Asian and Hispanic population’s residential patterns. As a result, when we think of integration today, we tend to include other ethnoracial groups beyond Whites and Blacks.

With the increased focus on multiethnic/racial integration, there are now so many moving parts (Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians) that we seem to have become remiss in specifying which group is integrating with which group. When we look closer at the racial breakdown in studies of multiethnic/racial integration, 21 percent of them have no perceptible percentage of Blacks, while 15 percent are neighborhoods where no group achieved majority status. The rest have multiple sizable ethnoracial groups, including Blacks.
Pointing out these distinctions is important because although all can be called “multiethnic/racial integration,” there is tremendous variety as to which minority group or groups are included. To illustrate our point, we highlight three examples. In Talen’s (2010) qualitative study of integration in six communities in Chicago, only one community includes a significant proportion of Blacks (at 24.1 percent), and the remaining five have fewer than 7 percent Black residents. In contrast, the racial composition of each ethnoracial group in Clark’s (1993) study was 25 percent to 33 percent, ensuring that each group is perceptibly present. And last, in Britton’s (2011) quantitative study of the relationship between integrated living and interethnic/racial friendship, the no-majority neighborhood consists of about one third Whites, one third Hispanic, 17 percent Black, and the rest Asians. With such variety in which ethnoracial group is integrating with whom, is it appropriate to group them under the same category: “multiethnic/racial integration”?

Grouping together different types of multiethnic/racial integration under an umbrella term, without any specification, is problematic because each combination of racial/ethnic groups, particularly those that do not have a sizable population of Blacks, has different causes and consequences. First, the growth of Hispanic and Asian immigrants erodes the number of White-dominated neighborhoods, leading to the rise in communities with some level of racial heterogeneity (Logan and Zhang 2010). However, Ellen, Horn, and O’Regan (2012) show that although White-Black neighborhoods increased from 1980 to 2000, their numbers have plateaued since then, at about 10 percent. Between 2000 and 2010, the rise in integrated neighborhoods from 25.2 percent to 30.3 percent is attributed to the growth of White-Hispanic, White-Asian/other and White-mixed minority neighborhoods. Some have observed, indeed, that multiracial/ethnic integration is, in practice, an integration between Whites and non-Blacks (Flores and Lobo 2012; Friedman 2008). Thus, integration has moved a long distance from its roots in studies of White-Black neighborhoods.

Second and related, Asians and Hispanics are integrating with Whites at a faster pace than Blacks (Ellen et al. 2012). Logan and Zhang (2010) report that in most instances, Hispanics and Asians enter previously all-White neighborhoods first, followed by Blacks. This suggests that Whites are comfortable sharing neighborhoods with Blacks only if there is a buffer zone comprising a significant proportion of Asian and Hispanic residents. These nuances are glossed over because we often pay insufficient attention to which ethnoracial group is integrating with whom. Given the different implications, this is problematic.

DISCUSSION

We began this analysis by referring to the controversial proclamation that segregation was dead. In this synthesis, we show that both Glaeser and Vigdor (2012) and their critics are in some sense correct. At its core, Glaeser and Vigdor have a different definition of what integration means than do their critics. This is due in part to the fact that there is insufficient attention paid to how integration is defined and measured, as well as to a lack of specificity in terms of which racial/ethnic group is integrating with whom. Our core findings are summarized as follows. First, there has been a change in how integration is defined—moving from a multidimensional concept to a unidimensional focus on numerical integration. What we have lost as a result is an understanding of the
social aspects of integration. To be sure, the almost exclusive focus on studying integration in terms of racial composition has yielded important insights. For example, these studies show that stably integrated communities are possible (Ellen 2000). Additionally, we are able to systematically compare integrated and segregated neighborhoods along multiple dimensions (including economic resources, school quality, crime levels, etc.), and this allows us to assess the extent to which they are unequal. For example, Peterson and Krivo (2010) show that people living in segregated minority neighborhoods are subjected to higher rates of violent crimes, experience higher levels of poverty, and have fewer economic opportunities than those who live in integrated communities (or, of course, all-White segregated neighborhoods).

But there is much to be gained by returning to our roots and defining integration using both racial composition and social contact. First, we are able to assess if social integration accompanies numeric integration. Do intergroup relations improve alongside the rise in numerically integrated communities? Are some numerically integrated communities more socially integrated than others, and why? There are signs of resurgence in research that has started to refocus on multidimensional integration with an eye toward understanding the social aspects of integrated living (e.g., Woldoff 2011).

In one sense, the trends we observe in how integration is measured have moved in the opposite direction as that of the definitions: rather than becoming “more simple,” it has become more complicated, regardless of whether it is White-Black integration or multiethnic/racial integration. The inconsistency in how we measure integration has resulted in a morass of measurement mayhem. To be sure, there is not a simple solution due to the increasing diversity of our nation. But the current state of the field is hampering progress. One possibility is to develop a multidimensional theoretical framework for residential integration that includes both racial composition and social interactions. In that way, measuring integration becomes more consistent and theoretically productive.

Last, the question of which ethnic/racial group is integrating with whom necessitates greater specificity. Our synthesis shows that there is a tendency to lump neighborhoods with some level of racial mixture under a broad umbrella of integration. This is problematic because which group is integrating with which group matters. White-Black integrated and multiethnic/racial neighborhoods have different causes and consequences. There are also differences within neighborhoods that are lumped under multiethnic/racial integration. Some do not have a perceptible Black presence, while others do. Moving forward, future studies need to be more explicit in clarifying which ethnoracial group is sharing a residential space with whom and, importantly, spelling out the implications of these decisions. This will allow us to accumulate a richer understanding, indeed, of how neighborhoods that are integrated with two particular groups (e.g., Whites-Hispanics versus Hispanics-Blacks) differ from each other and, in turn, from neighborhoods integrated with multiple groups (e.g., Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics).

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NOTES

1. The Entropy Index, also referred to as Theil’s H, measures “evenness” or the degree to which the racial composition of a smaller spatial unit (e.g., census tract) resembles the racial composition in its larger geographical context (e.g., metro area).

2. There were other types of integration—White/other, Black/other—but there were too few to make meaningful comparisons of their cutoffs.

REFERENCES


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