National / U.S. Poverty / Poverty and Latino immigration in the United States

This essay examines the intersection of two major spatial patterns of human activity in the United States: the distribution of poverty and the distribution of Latino immigration. How do these perhaps seemingly unrelated phenomena interact? What will be the effect of millions of poor Latino immigrants attempting to survive and ultimately to thrive in the United States?

Geographers stress the importance of scale. At what grain of resolution is your question best suited? Should you study one meadow or the entire forest? One neighborhood or the whole city? Other core ideas of geography are space and place; although not necessarily dichotomous, the first is usually defined by quantitative physical measures, while the second is dependent on social constructions. We argue that an appropriate way to analyze poverty is through place, and at a fine scale of analysis. The question "Where is poverty in America?" could be answered as simply and as unhelpfully as "mostly in the South and Southeast," according to scholar Alemayehu Bishaw. A better question would be "What type of places are the poorest?" Scholar Michael A. Stoll's research has shown that the answer to that question has remained more or less unchanged for over 50 years: poor people mostly live in cities and in remote rural locations.

However, perhaps this scale of analysis is too coarse. Although it is useful for some analyses to separate the world into only three types of residence patterns, the truth is not that simple. The poor aren't randomly spread throughout cities, or evenly distributed across rural towns. The picture that emerges as we zoom in at finer analytical scales is one of racial and economic concentration and segregation: poor people live surrounded by other poor people in certain neighborhoods or sections of towns. They are separated from their better-off neighbors by more than physical space: lack of transportation, job opportunities, quality education, and access to services are bigger gaps than the often insignificant distances between rich and poor neighborhoods. This lack of access acts to keep people poor, and imposes additional costs to achieve an equivalent level of resources to that of people in non-poor areas, according to Bishaw and scholars Don E. Albrecht, Carol M. Albrecht, and Edward Murguia.

A striking feature of poverty concentration and segregation is how strong the effect is along racial and ethnic boundaries. In general, African American and Latino underprivileged people are much more concentrated and segregated in poor areas than are underprivileged white or Asian people; in addition, non-poor blacks and Latinos are much more likely to reside in poor neighborhoods. In 2000, 12% of whites in metropolitan areas lived in poor census blocks, compared to 45% of African Americans and 42% of Latinos. When Daniel T. Lichter and Kenneth M. Johnson restricted their 2006 study's results only to the underprivileged, it found that 37% of poor whites lived in poor census blocks, compared to a striking 71% of poor blacks and 66% of poor Latinos.

The patterns were similar for non-metro areas. Even within poor places, African Americans and Latinos are highly segregated in their own groups; and when they live in non-poor regions, poor blacks and Latinos are still highly segregated. For example, based on 2000 U.S. Census data, Lichter and Johnson reported that one index of dissimilarity measuring segregation found that poor whites in urban counties had a segregation index value (from 0 to
100) of 30, while African Americans had a value of 50 and Latinos a value of 60. It is worth mentioning that while these patterns exist for blacks, Latinos and whites, the effect is slightly stronger for blacks than for Latinos, and notably stronger for blacks and Latinos than it is for whites, as shown by Lichter and Johnson's research and by Douglas S. Massey and Mary J. Fisher's 2003 study.

How do these patterns of poverty distribution relate to the pattern of Latino immigration and migration that has emerged over the last 25 years or so? The basic outlines of Latino immigration and migration are as follows: According to a U.S. Census Bureau report, The Hispanic Population: 2010 by Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert, Latino immigration has greatly increased in recent years. Latino immigrants are now settling in places beyond their traditional residence states of California, Texas, and Florida, with increased immigration to the Southeast, the West, and the Midwest. However, again this scale is too coarse: more importantly, Latino immigrants are settling outside of traditional "gateway cities" and are especially moving to rural destinations, as indicated by scholars Jorge Durand, Douglas S. Massey, and Fernando Charvet in 2000; and by Lichter and Johnson in 2006. With Latinos often in search of low-skill jobs, sometimes in the meat- and food-processing industry, this population movement has kept many rural areas from losing population or even helped them gain residents, reversing a multigenerational trend of shrinking numbers in rural areas.

This historic population shift across the United States has moved millions of people thousands of miles each, but it seems insufficient to move poor people out of the ghettos and barrios. New poor Latino immigrants are just as concentrated, or perhaps even more concentrated, than in past years, according to a 2008 study by John Iceland and Melissa Scopilitti. An optimistic viewpoint would be that immigrants are usually poor, and after economic success in this or the next generation, Latinos will disperse from poor neighborhoods and help desegregate America. The pessimistic counterargument is that poor places keep people poor, due to segregation and lack of access to resources.

A key question emerges: Will this new wave of immigration lead to new patterns of racial and ethnic desegregation, or are will the new wave of Latino immigrants simply added to the seemingly permanent "underclass"? We propose that the language barrier that many Latino immigrants face make this question especially important. Douglas Massey and Garvey Lundy have found that segregation and isolation are sufficiently strong forces to produce distinct language patterns in English-speaking populations in areas of concentrated poverty. Therefore, non-English speaking immigrants may find it even more difficult to move out of segregated areas. Low exposure to English-speaking communities may preclude immigrants' efforts to speak English in recent immigrant communities. While Spanish-English bilingualism is a valuable skill in today's America, the inability to speak English remains a serious handicap. The societal forces that produce economic and racial segregation have created a number of barriers to economic integration, and additional language barriers place an additional burden that will be very difficult to overcome.

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Daniel Ervin received a B.A. in psychology from George Washington University in 2002. After earning his degree, he worked in the nonprofit and public health fields for a number of years before returning to college to earn his M.A. in Geography from the University of Wyoming. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Geography at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Ervin's research interests include food and culture, medical geography, Latin America, and tourism. His doctoral dissertation focuses on Latino immigrants and diet change.
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