

Research ties persistence of 'white flight' to race, not socioeconomic factors

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"White flight" from the city to the suburbs has long been identified as producing racially segregated communities. Some scholars have argued the behavior is motivated not by race but by a desire to live in more stable and prosperous neighborhoods.

But new research from Indiana University Bloomington casts doubt on that explanation. Examining population trends in racially mixed suburbs, sociologist Samuel Kye finds that white [flight](#) occurs when nonwhite residents move in, regardless of socioeconomic factors.

"White flight is actually more likely to occur in middle-class neighborhoods rather than in poor neighborhoods," he said. "Once a community has a large enough percentage of African-American, Hispanic or Asian residents, white flight is more likely."

The article, "The persistence of white flight in middle-class suburbia," was published in the journal *Social Science Research*. Kye is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Sociology in the IU Bloomington College of Arts and Sciences.

The study uses census data from 1990, 2000 and 2010 to examine the changing racial makeup of suburbs in the 150 largest U.S. metropolitan areas. It defines white flight as what happens when an area loses at least 100 white residents and at least 25 percent of its white population over 10 years.

While previous research has examined white flight, he said, it has been difficult to untangle racial dynamics from a tendency for people to move to more attractive neighborhoods. Race could serve as a proxy for family income, neighborhood stability, school reputation and other quality-of-life factors.

But the development of so-called ethno-burbs, suburbs with large African-American, Asian-American and Hispanic populations, opened the door to a closer look. Over half of nonwhite residents of large metropolitan areas now live in suburbs such as predominantly Asian areas near Los Angeles and San Francisco, Arab-American enclaves near Detroit and African-American-populated areas near Washington, D.C.

The growth of ethno-burbs, and the fact that some are middle-class and others are poor, created the conditions for a natural experiment, Kye said. If race were a proxy for poverty, white flight should be greater in poor suburbs. In fact, it has been greater in middle-class suburbs. Overall, areas that saw white flight lost, on average, 40 percent of their white population over a decade.

"If you look at the trend curves, once the nonwhite groups become 20 to 25 percent of the population, that's when it flips," Kye said. "Whites are willing to tolerate a certain level of diversity, but once it crosses a threshold, white flight becomes likelier to occur."

The findings matter, Kye said, because other studies have shown that living in stable, racially integrated neighborhoods is associated with improved outcomes in education, health and other factors. And those who live among other racial and ethnic groups are less likely to give in to prejudice and stereotypes.

If there's good news from the broader body of research on white flight, Kye said, it's that young white people—those in their 20s and early

30s—have migration patterns that produce more integrated [neighborhoods](#) rather than replicating white flight. But it remains to be seen, he said, whether that trend will continue as they build families and think more about schools and neighborhood safety.

More information: Samuel H. Kye, The persistence of white flight in middle-class suburbia, *Social Science Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.02.005](#)

Provided by Indiana University

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