

White flight may still enforce segregation

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As the population of people of color grows across the United States, white Americans are still prone to move when neighborhoods diversify, and their fears and stereotypical beliefs about other racial and ethnic groups may help maintain segregation, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

In a nationally [representative survey](#) and six additional studies, white Americans perceived a threat to their culture and way of life when presented with information about changing demographics in hypothetical white-majority neighborhoods and schools, compared with when no demographic change was projected. The projected [population](#) growth of Arab Americans, Latino Americans and Asian Americans evoked the strongest feelings of foreign cultural threat, followed by the projected population growth of Black Americans. The research was published online in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.

"The more that white Americans perceived this foreign cultural threat, the more they reported wanting to move out of those communities," said lead researcher Linda Zou, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Maryland. "Racial segregation of schools and neighborhoods never ended. The country is growing more diverse, but those changing racial demographics may trigger heightened perceptions of threat among white Americans and contribute to the persistence of segregation."

Since 2000, the population growth of Latino Americans has accounted for more than half of the total population growth in the United States. According to U.S. Census projections, the United States will be a majority minority nation by 2044, when non-Hispanic whites will make up just under 50% of the population, compared with approximately 25% for Hispanics, 13% for Blacks, 8% for Asians, and 4% for multi-racial people. Non-Hispanic whites currently make up approximately 58% of the U.S. population.

The perception of different types of threat is often fueled by different underlying stereotypes, Zou said. For example, the study found that while Asian Americans were perceived by white Americans as a greater threat than Black Americans to a hypothetical white-majority neighborhood's cultural character, Black Americans were perceived as a

greater threat than Asian Americans to the neighborhood's safety and resources. Another study about schools found that white parents reported a greater degree of perceived foreign cultural threat from a growing Latino American student body compared with a growing Black American student body.

The research included data from a 2000 nationwide survey with 2,213 white Americans (54% of whom were female). Respondents who reported greater feelings of foreign cultural threat were equally more likely to oppose living in neighborhoods with Latino Americans, Asian Americans or Black Americans.

Six additional studies that were conducted online or in Seattle from 2016-18 produced more detailed findings. White Americans were more likely to want to move out of hypothetical white-majority neighborhoods in response to both Black American and Latino American population growth compared with Asian American population growth. They were also more likely to want to move out in response to Asian American population growth compared with no projected demographic change.

White Americans tended to perceive a greater foreign cultural [threat](#) from both Latino American and Asian American population growth (compared with no projected [demographic change](#)) even though participants were told that the ethnic minority growth was from people born in the United States. Previous studies have found that white Americans often consider U.S.-born Latino Americans and Asian Americans as less American or more foreign than their white counterparts.

The studies didn't analyze whether the participants' political affiliation affected the findings, but even liberal white parents have resisted sending their children to integrated schools in New York City and other areas, Zou said. While more white Americans may say they support

racial integration, that doesn't necessarily reflect where they choose to live or send their children to school, she added.

Other research suggests that programs and policies designed to welcome immigrants could help improve attitudes and support among white Americans for neighborhood and school integration by signaling positive local norms, Zou said. The research relied on surveys and data about hypothetical neighborhoods. Additional research is needed about white flight in actual [neighborhoods](#) across the United States, according to the researchers.

More information: Linda Zou et al, Diversifying neighborhoods and schools engender perceptions of foreign cultural threat among White Americans, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/xge0001115](#)

Provided by American Psychological Association

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