Data Visualization

Visualizing Variation in Majority-Black Suburbs in the United States

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Abstract
The aim of this visualization is to highlight sociodemographic variation among Black suburbs and spur further research on them. The authors provide a sociodemographic portrait of Black suburbs, defined as those that are more than 50 percent Black, to highlight their prevalence and variety. The 100 largest metropolitan statistical areas in 2018 contained 413 Black suburbs, representing 5 percent of all suburbs. The authors examine distributions of Black suburbs on two characteristics, median household income and housing age, to make two points. First, Black suburbs feature substantial sociodemographic variation in terms of both income and housing age. Second, this variation is not primarily a function of suburbs’ Black population share. Contrary to common assumptions, Black suburbs are not all older suburbs populated by the socioeconomically disadvantaged but include newer, middle-class, and affluent places as well.

Keywords
Black suburbs, suburbanization

Although suburbanization has largely been a racial project by Whites to create exclusionary communities, Black suburbs have always been present in metropolitan landscapes. However, scholars “have done a better job excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even White suburbanites,” as Black suburbs have received comparatively scarce scholarly attention (Wiese 2005:5). In this visualization, we provide a demographic portrait of Black suburbs in 2018 to highlight their prevalence and variety. We recognize the complexity of Black suburbs both as communities profoundly shaped by spatial systems of white supremacy (Taylor 2019) and as opportunities for Black placemaking, where “[sub]urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance” (Hunter et al. 2016:31).

With this visualization, we aim to highlight sociodemographic variation among Black suburban communities and inspire more research on them. We define Black suburbs as suburbs that are majority Black (>50 percent). Figure 1A plots the number of Black suburbs and their share of all suburbs from 1970 to 2018 for the 100 largest metropolitan areas. In 1970, only 81 Black suburbs existed, making up only 2 percent of all suburbs. However, Black suburbs have increased steadily over time, both in raw number and as a proportion of all suburbs, until a plateau after 2010. In 2018, we identify 413 Black suburbs, representing 5 percent of all suburbs and a fivefold increase since 1970.

Despite common assumptions, Black suburbs are socioeconomically varied. Figure 1B displays the distribution of median household income across Black suburbs. Black suburbs range from socioeconomically disadvantaged to affluent, though they cluster at the lower end of the distribution and have a mean of median household income $49,000. The median household incomes of Black suburbs range from $12,000 in Hilltop, Georgia, to $155,000 in Fairwood, Maryland. This variation is not simply a function of the Black population share. Figure 1C presents a scatterplot of median household income by percentage Black, with a line of best fit. Both poor and advantaged suburbs exist across the range of percentage Black, and the correlation of the two variables is very weak ($r = −.099$).

The age of housing stock in Black suburbs is also exhibits substantial variation (Figure 1D). This distribution is contrary to common assumptions that Black suburbs are older, inner-ring suburbs. Black suburbs with newer housing stock are concentrated in the South. Migration of Black people, many of middle-class status, to the South in recent decades

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Figure 1. (A) The number and percentage of majority-Black suburbs among all suburbs in the 100 largest metropolitan statistical areas in the United States from 1970 to 2018. (B) Distribution of 2018 median household income in 2018 dollars among Black suburbs. (C) Scatterplot of 2018 median household income in 2018 dollars and percentage Black, with line of best fit, for Black suburbs. (D) Distribution of 2018 median year structure built for housing units among Black suburbs. (E) Scatterplot of 2018 median year structure built and percentage Black, with line of best fit, for Black suburbs.
has contributed to this pattern (Lacy 2016). Figure 1E illustrates that suburban housing age is only weakly related to Black population share ($r = -0.125$).

Composing 5 percent of all suburbs in the 100 largest metropolitan statistical areas, Black suburbs are not uncommon and occur across many types of sociodemographic environments. Scant scholarly attention has been paid to Black suburbs, possibly because of a lack of awareness of their prevalence and diversity. With suburbs occupying the largest portion of housing, study of their diversity is all the more critical. Better understanding of the characteristics of these communities is needed, as well as exploration into the lived experiences of their residents.

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**Supplemental Material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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**Author Biographies**

Kiara Wyndham Douds is a PhD candidate in sociology at New York University. Their research explores the mechanisms of racial inequality production in contemporary America. The primary vein of this research focuses on the intertwined nature of race and space to investigate the spatial production of racial inequality. They do this by contextualizing the study of concepts such as racial ideologies, community trust, and racial health disparities to show how local contexts shape both ideas and material outcomes related to racial inequality. In another line of research, they investigate other, nonspatial contexts of racial inequality.

R. L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy is an associate professor in the Sociology of Education program in the Department of Applied Statistics, Social Science and Humanities at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development. His central line of research examines inequality in suburban spaces, including schools, housing, and political communities. His first book, _Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources, and Suburban Schooling_, examined the experiences of low-income and racial-minority families’ attempts to access school-related resources in an affluent suburb. He is currently fielding a multisite ethnographic study in Westchester County, New York, that examines residents’ experiences with housing and schools. He is currently codeveloping a national study of Black suburbs and Black suburban residents.

Kimberley Johnson is a professor of metropolitan studies in the Department of Social and Cultural Analysis and an associate professor in the Wilf Family Department of Politics and Wagner School of Public Policy at New York University. Her research focuses on race and ethnic politics, urban and suburban politics, and American political development. She is currently completing a book focusing on the Black Power movement in four cities during the 1960s and 1970s. She is the author of two books as well as numerous articles and chapters. Her current research focuses on Black (sub)urban citizenship and governance in core cities as well as Black suburbs. She is currently codeveloping a national study of Black suburbs and Black suburban residents.