Race and Income in U.S. Suburbs: Are Diverse Suburbs Disadvantaged?

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Abstract

Sociological narratives of communities of color often make two assumptions: that people of color are concentrated largely in cities and that communities of color are disadvantaged. However, the recent widespread suburbanization of people of color challenges both assumptions, destabilizing how we link race, place, and class. This visualization uses the 2019 American Community Survey to ask, How is racial diversity in suburbs associated with income? The findings suggest that, by and large, racially diverse suburbs are middle class when comparing their median household income with the national value ($63,000). The most multiracial suburbs host populations with the highest median incomes (mean ~ $85,000). Black and Latinx median household incomes surpass the national value in these diverse suburbs. Moreover, these findings are robust in regressions including metropolitan fixed effects. Given that most people of color live in suburbs, understanding suburban communities of color is critical for understanding the American geography of racial inequality.

Keywords
suburbs, race and ethnicity, residential, diversity, income

Sociological narratives of communities of color tend to emphasize urban disadvantage (for critical exceptions see, e.g., Cheng 2013; Lacy 2007; Patillo 2013). These narratives contain two different assumptions. First, they assume that people of color are concentrated largely in urban areas. Second, they assume that communities of color are disadvantaged or that the presence of people of color creates community disadvantage. The recent widespread suburbanization of people of color challenges both assumptions, destabilizing how we link race, place, and class. As of 2010, 51 percent of Black Americans, 62 percent of Asians, 59 percent of Latinx, and 78 percent of whites lived in suburbs (Frey 2018). Many people of color live in suburbs because they see them as desirable, resource-rich communities with good schools and other public goods (Lewis-McCoy 2014). Yet little research examines the class dimensions of growing racial diversity in American suburbs, despite their importance for understanding the geography of racial inequality in the United States.

This visualization, based on American Community Survey 2019 five-year estimates, shows the association between suburb-level median household income and racial diversity for all suburbs (Figure 1). See the figure note and the supplemental material for definitions of diversity and suburbs as well as details on the sample, data, and methods.

Figures 1a and 1b show smoothed means produced by generalize additive models. If we understand the middle class as being near the middle of the distribution, by and large, diverse suburbs are middle class or even advantaged. On average, low-diversity suburbs show the lowest incomes, while the most multiracial suburbs show median household incomes nearly $20,000 higher than the national median. Similar trends exist when analyzing, Black, Latinx, and white incomes separately (Figure 1b). The Black median income nationally is $42,000, but Black incomes match the overall national median ($63,000) in low- to moderate-diversity suburbs and surpass it in the most multiracial contexts. Asians provide an exception: Asian incomes decline with

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Figure 1. Median household income by levels of diversity in suburbs: (a) smoothed means of overall median household income, (b) smoothed means of race-specific median household income, (c) predictive margins of overall median household income, and (d) predictive margins of race-specific median household income.

Source: American Community Survey 2019 five-year estimates.

Note: In (a) and (c), n = 14,324 suburbs. In (b) and (d), Asian, n = 3,700; Black, n = 4,881; Latinx, n = 6,261; and white = 13,873. I define suburbs as all census places in metropolitan areas that are not the largest, core city of the metropolitan area. For example, the suburbs of Houston are all census places in the Houston metropolitan area that are not Houston proper (e.g., Sugar Land, Texas). I generated smoothed means curves using generalized additive model smoothing procedures in the ggplot2 package in R. I generated predictive margins through regression analysis in Stata. These regressions included metropolitan fixed effects to control for unobserved local characteristics. I use the entropy index as a widely established measure of diversity. Using entropy, suburbs are more diverse when groups are more evenly represented. A suburb that is 25 percent each racial group is more diverse than a suburb that is 50 percent each of two groups, and the least diverse spaces are those composed entirely of one group. For context, Duluth, Georgia, has a diversity score of 96 (22 percent Black, 25 percent Asian, 16 percent Latinx, 34 percent white, and 3 percent other); Adamsville, Alabama, has a score of 52 (48 percent Black, 48 percent white, and 4 percent other); and Beverly, Massachusetts, has a diversity score of 29 (2 percent Black, 2 percent Asian, 5 percent Latinx, 89 percent white, and 2 percent other). These graphs show that median household income in diverse suburbs is higher on average than the national median. This is especially important for racial inequality because it suggests that Black and Latinx individuals can access the resources of middle-class contexts.
diversity, but they are high earners, with an average of nearly $90,000 in the most diverse suburbs.

Regressions including metropolitan area fixed effects, controlling for unobserved local factors, emphasize the middle-class nature of diverse suburbs. The most diverse suburbs show the highest overall values (~$75,000; Figure 1c). Race-specific trends (Figure 1d) become more moderate compared with Figure 1b, but all groups show incomes at or above the national median across the distribution of diversity. Moreover, Black and Latinx incomes remain substantially higher than their group-specific national medians.

Roughly 45 million people of color and 42 million white people lived in suburbs with diversity scores above 50 in 2019. On average, these people live in middle-class contexts, leading us to question stereotypes of race, place, and disadvantage. The time is right to investigate how suburban life potentially moderates inequality for people of color, beginning with the evidence that large numbers of people of color can live in racially diverse, middle-class contexts. For example, how does homeownership in suburbs influence the racial wealth gap? Understanding the class context of suburban people of color is critical for understanding race and racism in the twenty-first century.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Ankit Rastogi is a postdoctoral fellow with the Center for the Study of Ethnicity, Race, and Immigration at the University of Pennsylvania. Their research explores the lives of people of color who live in suburbs and rural areas. They are interested primarily in the ways communities of color defy dominant narratives of urban sociology and demography.