

**HOW SEGREGATED ARE THE AFFLUENT?  
CONCEPTUAL AND MEASUREMENT PROBLEMS IN RESEARCH ON SPATIAL INEQUALITY**

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The residential segregation of the affluent has received much less attention than other forms of spatial distance between social groups in the United States. In part this results from greater concern for the most disadvantaged among scholars, leading to a focus on racial segregation and the isolation of the poor. Yet the spatial concentration of privilege is as important to the production and reproduction of inequality as is the concentration of disadvantage. Disparities between affluent and poor neighborhoods have long been documented to contribute to divergent life chances and urban theory argues that the movement of more privileged groups to affluent enclaves itself helps create and maintain impoverished ghettos (Park et al. 1925; Wilson 1987). Further, affluent segregation may have become more important in the system of stratification in the US at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: economic restructuring strongly favored the affluent top 20% of households, who received the majority of income gains while everyone else fell behind (Morris and Western 1999). This pattern of rising income inequality makes understanding the character of spatial division between the affluent and the rest especially critical.

The small literature on affluent segregation shows that it occurs at substantial levels in US metropolitan areas and followed a distinctive historical trend at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While all forms of economic segregation exhibit lower levels than racial segregation, segregation is highest at the tails of the income distribution, and affluent segregation occurs at levels comparable to the segregation of the poor (Massey and Eggers 1993; Coulton et al. 1996; Fischer et al. 2004). As important, like all forms of economic segregation, affluent segregation increased in the 1970s and 1980s, in contrast to the decline (albeit small) in African American segregation (Jargowsky 1996; Massey 1996; Fischer et al. 2004). The 1990s brought broad improvements in economic segregation, including a particularly striking decline among the poor (Jargowsky 2003). However, affluent segregation stands out as being the only form not to show significant

decline, staying relatively stable, with either minimal decline or increasing slightly depending on the measure used (Massey and Fischer 2003; Fischer et al. 2004). Yet many questions remain about the character of high status residential distance across the US.

One key problem is that the scientific development of the conceptualization and measurement of affluence is much less developed than for poverty. There is a long history of theoretical work on how to define the poor, including for example concerns over *absolute* versus *relative* poverty that can be seen in the most recent preoccupation with poverty as “social exclusion” (see Brady 2003 for an excellent review and critique of this literature). An even larger body of work tests alternative measures of poverty and examines how robust our estimates of the effects of poverty are to different specifications (Brady 2003 offers a good discussion again; also, Iceland 2006). While research on residential segregation does not always incorporate such sophisticated concepts or methods to study the geographic isolation of the poor, this literature has nevertheless grappled with many of these same issues (Massey and Eggers 1993; Wilson 1987). The few studies of affluent segregation, on the other hand, must rely on relatively thin conceptualizations of affluence that have little theoretical grounding. The most typical measures are pegged to the poverty line (affluence is often operationalized as four times the poverty line for a family of four), or some cut of the top of the distribution (often, the top quintile). These measures are nominally relative but the selection of the particular definition is ultimately rather arbitrary.

In this paper I argue that our understanding of spatial inequality is limited by inattention to processes at the top of the class structure. I propose a theoretical framework for conceptualizing affluence and affluent segregation that draws on the rich tradition of stratification research in sociology and social science more broadly. Then I examine what the implications of a better conceptualization of affluence are for measurement. I review and critique existing approaches and examine several alternative measures, analyzing their advantages and disadvantages. I conclude that just as for poverty, the appropriate measure depends in part on the questions asked, and that greater sophistication in thinking about the affluent will improve our capacity to capture all the ways that spatial inequality structures life chances in US metropolitan areas.

### **Theoretical contribution**

I draw on general theories of stratification to argue that spatial inequality is shaped by dynamics of privilege as well as disadvantage. I argue that affluent segregation is a factor of *social closure*, drawing on Weber's classic concept (1978) as well as Frank Parkin's more recent development of the idea (1982). Social closure is in a sense a parallel to the concept of social exclusion in poverty research. Whereas *social exclusion* captures the obstacles that the poor face in reaching the opportunities and resources of mainstream society, *social closure* represents the hoarding and monopolization of those opportunities and resources at the top of the distribution of wealth and prestige. I emphasize that while closure may be actively sought, it also flows directly from any agglomeration of privilege where network effects and other group dynamics create a self-reinforcing cascade of advantages. This is what makes spatial enclaves of affluence particularly influential in stratification systems, in the same way that poor ghettos amplify the effects of poverty.

### **Measurement and empirical contribution**

The richer theoretical conceptualization of affluence as *social closure* indicates that different measures of affluence will capture different dimensions of privilege. I examine a range of interrelated issues in the measurement of affluence: 1) I consider whether it is possible to develop absolute and relative measures of privilege just like for poverty; 2) Pursuing the issue of absolute measures, I address alternative answers to the question of how rich people and neighborhoods need to be to be considered affluent; and 3) I examine a number of different relative measures, drawing on the poverty literature for exemplars.

### **Data and Methods**

I use *U.S. Census of Population and Housing* summary data (SF3) for tracts in all metropolitan areas in 2000. Characteristics of households and housing units in each tract in the US are summarized in this data. Census tracts are small geographic units designated by the Census Bureau in cooperation with local authorities that are intended to operationalize neighborhoods, with an average of 4,000 residents. As many have observed, Census tract boundaries do not necessarily correspond with what residents consider neighborhood boundaries, but they are the best unit available, and the most commonly used (Jargowsky 1997).

Metropolitan areas are defined in the Census as urbanized concentrations of at least 50,000 people. I include all “primary metropolitan areas” in the US, totally 331 in 2000.

I estimate a number of different measures of affluence and compare the impact of these differences on a number of segregation measures. Census family income data for tracts is available only as a categorical measure of the number of families at defined income levels and I discuss the additional challenges posed by this feature of the most typical data used to study segregation. I estimate the most commonly used measures of segregation, including the dissimilarity and exposure indices. But I also estimate some less commonly used but more spatially rich measures of concentration, centralization, and clustering (Massey and Denton 1988). These measures vary in how they are affected by the definition of affluence. I compare results to estimates of poverty and poverty segregation by way of context.

### **Preliminary findings**

Results show a rich empirical payoff to developing a more sophisticated approach to conceptualizing affluence. I highlight just one of the most interesting results next.

I find that alternative measures of affluence capture different features of privilege in American society. These differences have implications for measuring segregation, especially when multiple spatial dimensions of segregation are taken into account. More restrictive definitions of affluence typically result in higher estimates of segregation on the traditional measures of segregation, as predicted by the social closure model of affluent segregation. In that model, the most privileged groups should be most effective at maintaining separation from disadvantaged groups. The most affluent appear to be somewhat less spatially segregated on other dimensions, however—for example, the richer affluent are more likely to be centralized near downtown, whereas the less rich affluent are more likely to be on the metropolitan fringe. The divergence in these results is instructive for processes of social closure. Both more and less rich affluent achieve spatial distance from disadvantaged groups, but less rich affluent rely more on large spatial distances like between suburbs and central city, whereas richer affluent can attain social closure even while in relative proximity to poor areas. This suggests interesting questions about the role of micro-spatial mechanisms of segregation like private security systems or control of prime downtown locations.

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