



Will America's Growing Number of Racially Mixed Families Ensure That Neighborhoods Become More Diverse?

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More than ever before, Americans of different racial backgrounds are forming couples, married and otherwise. Racially mixed households have proliferated in recent decades, and in 2010 the U.S. Census identified more than five million married couples with members of different races or ethnicities. That represents almost ten percent of all married-couple households, compared to just one percent of households maintained by mixed-race couples forty years ago. Racial barriers are obviously softening among individuals, but we still know very little about where mixed-race couples choose to live. Are they helping U.S. neighborhoods become more diverse?

My research tackles this question by linking neighborhood and metropolitan data from 1985 to 2009 to individual data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. I utilize a statistical technique called “multilevel analysis” to compare five groupings of mixed-race couples – black-white couples, black-Latino couples, white-Latino couples and couples with either a white or black partner along with one from a race labeled “other.” Each of these sets of mixed-race couples was, in turn, compared to couples where both partners were either white or black. In the part of my research discussed here, I looked at the racial diversity of the neighborhoods where my various sets of couples resided, and also examined the characteristics of the neighborhoods that mixed-race and same-race couples moved into.

Explaining Where Mixed-Race Households Reside

Available evidence suggests that mixed-race households tend to live in racially diverse neighborhoods. To explain why this might be, researchers have pointed to various social dynamics that could encourage mixed-race households to live in different kinds of areas. Various factors could be at work, not all pushing in the same direction.

- For example, it could be that members of mixed-race households feel more comfortable in places where their unique status is less noticeable.
- Economic factors could matter. When people become more economically prosperous, they tend to move to higher-quality neighborhoods. So if mixed-race marriages often include higher-status members – at least compared to same-race marriages among minorities – then choices about neighborhoods may be due more to education and income than to race as such. Researchers need to take income and education into account before they draw conclusions about mixed-race couples.
- Members of mixed-race households may face discrimination, such as unequal treatment by rental agents and persistent racial biases in mortgage lending. If communities are resistant to interracial

marriages, then such couples could face even stronger discrimination than same-race minority households. Alternatively, the social advantages enjoyed by whites might provide minority-group members in mixed couples that include whites with some protection against discrimination.

- Finally, the structure of opportunities in local housing markets may shape residential choices. Compared to smaller places, metropolitan areas are likely to contain a relatively large number of diverse neighborhoods, increasing the chances that individual households will select this type of neighborhood. Given that mixed-race marriages are comparatively common in diverse metropolitan areas, it may be that the greater likelihood for mixed-race couples to live in diverse neighborhoods is primarily due to the racial and ethnic diversity of the cities they happen to reside in – rather than having much to do with personal choices.

Mixed-Race Couples' Relationship to Diverse Neighborhoods

When I tracked the residential experiences of mixed-race couples over time and compared those experiences to all-white and all-black households, I learned more about the unique experiences of mixed households. Overall, mixed-race households tended to reside in neighborhoods with significantly higher levels of racial diversity. More important, over time they remained more likely than homogeneous households to live in diverse neighborhoods, even when I took into account variations in age, family income, and the characteristics of metropolitan areas. Maybe people in mixed-race households simply want to live in diverse neighborhoods, but data I collected on movements by mixed-race couples raise questions about that hypothesis.

- If mixed-race couples have a stronger desire than others to live in diverse neighborhoods, we would expect them to stay there. But as the racial and ethnic diversity of neighborhoods goes up, mixed-race couples are no more likely to stay than all-white or all-black households.
- When mixed-race households do move they tend to enter neighborhoods that are more diverse than those selected by all-white households – especially when one partner is black.
- However, most types of mixed-race households do not move into areas very different than those where entirely black households live. Black-Latino couples have a slight preference for more diverse neighborhoods, and couples with one white partner are more likely to move into low-diversity areas.

Overall, my findings do not suggest that mixed couples always have a preference to live in diverse neighborhoods. Some observers have held out the hope that, as mixed partnerships and households become more common in American society, more and more neighborhoods are bound to become racially diverse. But by tracking movements over time, my research suggests that mixed households remain largely subject to the same types of dynamics that maintain sharp racial residential boundaries between blacks and whites in U.S. society.

Race continues to be central to how American neighborhoods form and change. In order to truly diversify neighborhoods, U.S. state and federal leaders must first counter the economic and attitudinal forces that have, for decades, reinforced racial residential segregation separating blacks and whites. Interracial unions alone surmount racial barriers.

Read more in Ryan Gabriel and Kyle Crowder, “The Residential Mobility and Attainment of Interracial Couples,” *Population Association of America*, April 2012.
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