BOOK REVIEW

Won't You Be My Neighbor? Race, Class, and Residence in Los Angeles

By Camille Zubrinsky Charles
Russell Sage Foundation, 2006, 246 pages

Reviewed by Kristin L. Perkins

Residential segregation means that minorities often live in undesirable neighborhoods; yet where we live affects our economic opportunity, social networks, and quality of life. Camille Zubrinsky Charles's book, *Won't You Be My Neighbor? Race Class, and Residence in Los Angeles,* adds to existing research that has historically focused solely on black-white residential segregation by expanding the scope to include the residential preferences and racial attitudes of native and foreign-born Latinos and Asians.

Within a brief description of the population dynamics and demographic shifts in Los Angeles over the past 30 years, Charles emphasizes the racial/ethnic tensions evident in the segregated city. Between 1980 and 2000, a dramatic increase in the number of Latino residents contributed to a decrease in the number of predominantly black census tracts. In addition, the number of majority-Asian tracts increased significantly. But Charles aptly writes that "it is a common misconception that a diverse city is logically an *integrated* city – particularly if 'integrated' is taken to mean a high level of contact between and interaction with people from varying racial-ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds," (3). Los Angeles demonstrates this point: in 2000, 68 percent of blacks, 63 percent of Latinos and 48 percent of Asians would have had to move for there to have been an even racial distribution across the city.

Charles bases the book on a survey conducted in Los Angeles between 1992 and 1994 designed to assess changing labor market dynamics, racial attitudes and relations, and residential segregation (this is a subset of the survey used by Farley et al. (1997) in their four-metropolis study of residential preferences). Like Farley et al., Charles explores socioeconomic status, prejudice and housing market discrimination as explanations for residential segregation evident in Los Angeles. After a brief discussion of the survey methodology, Charles reviews the existing research on residential segregation, preferences and prejudice, and concludes that active racial prejudice is a critical component of preference for integration and the persistence of racial segregation.

The strength of this book is the extent to which the Los Angeles study goes beyond the question of black-white residential segregation and includes Asians and Latinos in the survey and results. The survey received responses from approximately 1,000 individuals in each of the four racial/ethnic groups, providing a large enough sample size for robust statistical analysis, which Charles employs well. Existing research in planning and sociology has focused almost exclusively on black-white segregation, and while that is still the relevant measure in many U.S. cities, Charles's expanded scope is a refreshing update that reflects California's, and Los Angeles's, diversity.

Won't You Be My Neighbor? also thoroughly and convincingly discusses the role of immigration in inter-group relations and segregation. Charles seeks to determine how immigrants' views on race and residential preferences may differ from natives', and how these views are manifested through residential segregation. She accomplishes this through survey questions that classify immigrants by country of origin, length of time in United States, and English language skills. What Charles finds is that ethnic enclaves are important explanations for why Latino and Asian immigrants have less residential contact with whites, while at the same time Asian immigrants live in neighborhoods with relatively high median incomes. Alternatively, relatively low levels of residential contact between whites and Asians, Latinos, and blacks could be the result of housing market discrimination against all three minority groups found in the 2000 Housing Discrimination Study.

Like past studies, the book suggests that there is reason for optimism as substantial numbers of respondents across all racial and nativity-status categories appear accepting of residential integration. Charles is troubled, however, by the clear rank ordering of racial/ethnic groups, with whites consistently rated as the most desirable neighbors, blacks as the least desirable, and Latinos and Asians somewhere in between. Reading Charles's conclusion that active racial prejudice remains a significant contributor to residential segregation, I can't help but wonder if the survey would suggest a lesser role for prejudice if it were re-administered today, 15 years later. Given the substantial changes to Los Angeles's population over the last 15 years, it would have been useful for Charles to have at least updated her findings with secondary data if re-administering the survey would not have been possible.

Additionally, I wish Charles spent more time suggesting and critiquing strategies to address residential segregation and its subsequent inequities. She argues early on that increasing the income of minority households will not be enough to allow them access to integrated neighborhoods; and therefore the book's conclusion would be stronger if it explored alternative possibilities. Charles is a sociologist, but from a planner's

perspective, it would be useful if she incorporated ways in which planners and practitioners could use her findings to modify or otherwise influence the social and physical conditions existing in neighborhoods and communities.

Reference

Farley, Reynolds, Elaine L. Fielding and Maria Krysan. 1997. The residential preferences of blacks and whites: a four-metropolis analysis. *Housing Policy Debate* 8(4): 763-800.