

From the “Mississippi of the West” to the “City of Second Chances”: Contextualizing the Racial and Ethnic Composition of Las Vegas

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Abstract: Las Vegas’ residential terrain has often been overlooked beyond the city’s history of extreme spatial and economic segregation in the mid-1900s due to its development as a tourist city. This research reflects that history in the 21st century through the lens of population geography, which demonstrates that heavy in-migration to Nevada after 1990 flooded a landscape of severe segregation and thus reshaped the city’s racial and ethnic boundaries. A comparison between patterns of racial and ethnic distribution with access to quality education as well as the distribution of gated communities reveals that historical barriers to minority mobility persisted in new, more fluid forms after these waves of immigration. Namely, the overall geographical tendency of Las Vegas subregions with the highest proportions of gated communities and high-quality educational institutions to be areas with majority white populations demonstrates that systems of community and educational privatization may represent a new era of white flight. As such, this research introduces Las Vegas’ 20th and 21st century residential geography as a significant example of how racial barriers and tools of segregation transfigure over time, especially in environments undergoing immense demographic reorganization.

Keywords: *Las Vegas, migration, segregation, gated communities*

Introduction

A flashing, neon city founded in 1905 amid a vast desert, Las Vegas is a relatively new and unique physical symbol of the importation of capitalism through westward expansion and urbanization. However, the increasingly residential nature of the metropolitan, which has been expanding from its epicenter through suburbanization since the city's foundation, suggests that Las Vegas may serve as an important way to understand the social development of the United States through the 1900s. In contrast to cities with deep histories of segregation like Chicago and Los Angeles, Las Vegas does not receive as much scholarly attention in the realm of urban geography for its extremely swift transformation from being termed the "Mississippi of the West" in the mid-20th century to its more contemporary name, the "City of Second Chances." The following report suggests that Las Vegas presents a high-speed example of the process by which racial barriers can be built and ingrained into society.

More specifically, this research examines how racial barriers evolve in the face of contemporary migration patterns brought on by the notion of plentiful economic opportunity behind the nickname "City of Second Chances." Analysis of racial and ethnic distribution patterns suggest that changes in Las Vegas' physical geography exemplify the potential evolution of white flight from the process of suburbanization to that of privatization of specific suburban communities. By considering contemporary educational disparities between the metropolitan's suburban regions, this research concludes that despite Las Vegas' general decreases in overall racial and ethnic segregation, barriers may persist through exclusive community-building in a city that has repeatedly failed to provide functional reparations to address the severe racism that defined it far less than a century ago.

The Racial and Ethnic Composition of Las Vegas

The contemporary spatial arrangement of racial and ethnic groups in Las Vegas can largely be attributed to its status

as the fastest growing American city in the late 20th century (see Appendix A for graph of population growth). In 1980, the Hispanic and black populations in Las Vegas each amounted to less than 10% of the otherwise white demography (Howard & Lewis, 2017). By 2016, the Hispanic, black, and Asian populations grew to over 30%, 12%, and 10%, respectively—with non-Hispanic white individuals comprising less than half of the population (Howard & Lewis, 2017). This profound shift towards diversity occurred in waves of immigration which began around the 1990s, when advertised opportunity became an outstanding pull factor for the so-called “City of Second Chances.” From 1990 to 2010, Nevada experienced the highest rates of Asian immigration of any US city (Howard & Lewis, 2017). Thus, the relatively steady, low levels of Asian-white segregation through the 1990s indicate that Asian populations integrated evenly into the residential geography in spite of rapidly increasing populations (see Appendix B for Las Vegas segregation indices). On the contrary, the greater influx of Hispanic migrants during the 1990s coincided with Hispanic-white segregation indices increasing by nearly 15 points (Rowley, 2018). Altogether, the high influx of in-migration to Nevada since the 1990s expanded and diversified the population geography of Las Vegas, and this process yielded notably higher levels of segregation among the Hispanic population.

Consistently higher rates of first generation Hispanic immigration over several decades have coincided with more reinforced and visible ethnic clustering than that of Asian immigrants, which could reveal the structuralization of potential barriers to Hispanic mobility in the city. The 1990s solidified the dominance of a burgeoning Hispanic presence in Las Vegas’ “East Side” (Martinez, 2021). The job availability in service-oriented industries served as the major pull factor for Hispanic immigrants, who often emigrated from Central America. The East Side provided both proximity to the Strip and a large Spanish-speaking community (Martinez, 2021). While oral histories of Hispanic residents in the East Side suggest that chain migration played a large role in the continuity of this feature of the urban landscape, Lauber (2011) offers, instead that the East Side may have sustained by the steering of Hispanic home-seekers

(Martinez, 2021; Lauber, 2011). As Figure 1 displays, Las Vegas' Hispanic population expanded westward and northward significantly between 2000 and 2020, yet the predominance of the Hispanic population in the East side has persisted. Overall, the increased levels of Hispanic-white segregation between 1990 and 2000 geographically manifested as ethnic clustering in the East Side, which continues to serve as a significant feature of Las Vegas's contemporary population geography.

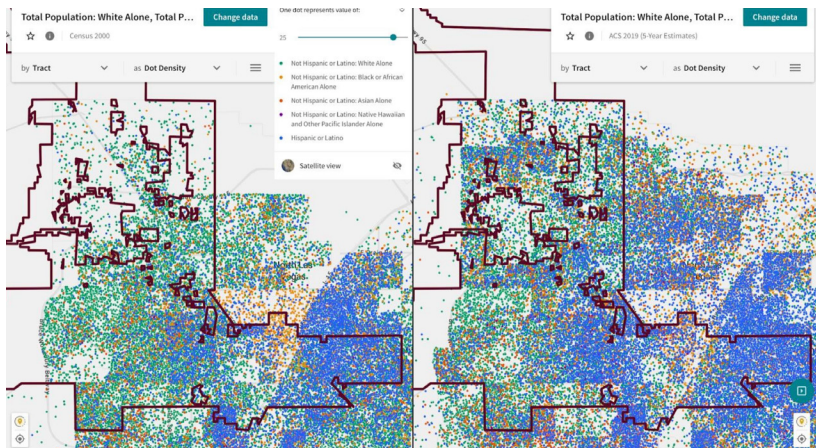


Figure 1. ACS 2019 Estimates (Left) vs. Census 2000 Data (Right) of Racial and Ethnic Population Distribution by Census Tract in Las Vegas, Nevada. Note. Maps created through SocialExplorer.com. [Ed. Note: Full color versions of this article are available at <https://escholarship.org/uc/alephucla/20/0>]

As a result of the influx of non-white immigrants in the 1990s, the white share of the population declined, leading black-white segregation to continually decrease. As is visible in Figure 1, the black population appears to have become considerably less segregated between 2000 and 2020. Researchers offer that these trends could result from generally declining non-white to white ratios in neighborhoods (Solis & Jackson, 2018). Supporting this, between 2000 and 2010, high levels of Asian and Hispanic immigration coincided with a notable decline in predominantly

white neighborhoods (Solis & Jackson, 2018). Thus, in-migration blurred the pre-existing spatial boundaries between black and white residence. However, it is vital to recognize that the immense waves of immigration from the 1990s onward flooded an urban landscape in which long-term, structural segregation was deeply embedded. These structures must be addressed in order to assess the historical significance of the statistical assertion that black-white segregation is in decline, as well as to root contemporary high-level Hispanic-white segregation as manifesting in a geography of extreme racial barriers.

The History of Segregation in the Central City

To understand the structure of segregation in Las Vegas, one must begin at the foundational site of racial separation: the Historic Westside. In the face of aggressive employment and housing discrimination, the Westside arose alongside the original Strip as a distinctly segregated neighborhood in the early 20th century—earning the city moniker: “the Mississippi of the West” (Horsford et al., 2013). This title’s comparison of the relatively new city to Mississippi reflects the extremity of black-white segregation while also expressing the recognized *Americanness* of forging racial boundaries through the expansion of the built environment. Through the mid-1900s, the city refused to invest in the Westside because of “low property values,” leaving the area without economic opportunity and basic amenities (White 2004, 79). Simultaneously, real estate and lending agencies practiced redlining, denying loans to non-white people attempting to move out from the Westside, such that by 1960, Las Vegas had the highest dissimilarity index between black and white populations of any American metropolis (White, 2004; Van Valey, 1977). The maps in Figure 2 demonstrate that even in 1990, over a decade after the Civil Rights era, Las Vegas’ black population remained relatively confined to the Westside. This feature can be attributed to the maintenance of structural barriers to black mobility in the broader city, in addition to important black-led community reinvestment movements in the Westside that emerged, in part, in reaction to the shortcomings of integrationist gains (Orleck,

2005). As such, the city's geography developed unevenly into a patchwork of racially-separated regions leading into the 21st century, thus establishing Las Vegas as its own, modern manifestation of institutionalized racism in America beyond the context of Westward expansion (Rothman & Davis, 2002; White, 2004).

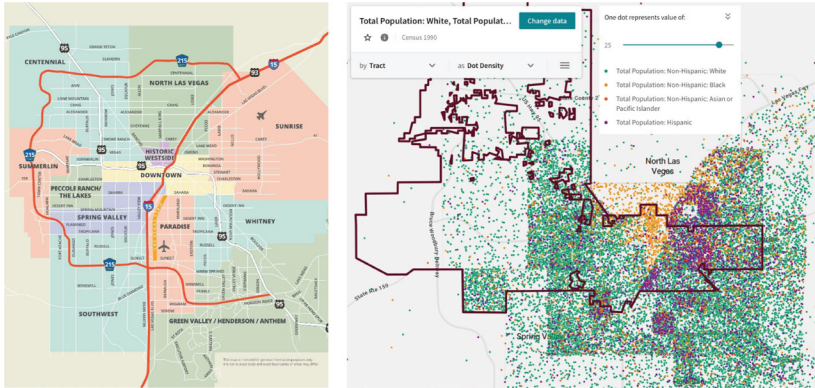


Figure 2. Census 1990 Data of Racial and Ethnic Population Distribution by Census Tract in Las Vegas Metropolitan Statistical Area (Las Vegas Metro). Note. (Left) From SocialExplorer.com. (Right) From Martinez, 2021.

Moreover, despite the Westside's once central location, the constant southward migration of the Strip peripheralized the community, which receded into North Las Vegas just as strides towards equality began to progress. Six years after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, hotels "reluctantly" signed to an open employment agreement, and the city government enacted a fair housing law (Rothman & Davis 2002, 264). A decade later, in 1981, Theron Goynes became the first black elected official to lead North Las Vegas City Council meetings (Davis, 2021). Thus, the northward expansion of the Westside introduced new opportunities for employment, housing, and integrated community leadership. Altogether then, new spatial, political, economic, and social conditions brought about by black activists and political

figures opened the door to racially-inclusive suburbanization directly before the stark rise in immigration after 1990. As such, interactions between the swelling central city (Las Vegas) and newly developing cities classified as “Las Vegas Suburbs” played a major role in determining the changing face of segregation in the broad metropolitan area (Solano-Patricio et al., 2020). Ultimately, while strides towards economic and residential integration were enacted in the 1960s, the deconstruction of the racial barriers surrounding the Westside only became visible following the massive waves of in-migration that expanded and transformed the population geography of the city. As such, the question that remains is whether the city of “second chances” lived up to its new name or if instead the “Mississippian” barriers of the past persisted in new forms.

Suburbanization, Diversification, and Education: A Tale of Two Cities

From 2000 to 2020, the varying extents of diversification in Las Vegas suburbs reflect the continuity of discriminatory institutional practices as white population shares decline. By 2019, the once sparsely populated, dominantly white northern region of North Las Vegas transformed into an integrated, diverse landscape (see Figure 1). The suburb’s diversification may be due to the increased mobility of the black community, especially given that Hispanic and Asian presence often serves as a bridge for black entrance into historically white neighborhoods (Logan and Zhang, 2013). However, in a report examining lending practices throughout the Las Vegas Metro, Lauber (2011) suggested that both black and Hispanic potential home buyers may have been racially steered towards North Las Vegas. Supporting this possibility, other Las Vegas suburbs, such as Henderson, gained much lower proportions of black and Hispanic populations (Welsh, 2020). As such, racial barriers seem to have persisted in the process of suburbanization, yielding disparate racial and ethnic populations between different Las Vegas suburbs.

While suburbs traditionally attracted city-dwellers based on factors such as higher quality schools, North Las Vegas offers

the lowest quality schools in the Las Vegas Metro. Between 2007-2008 and 2012-2013, Welsh (2019) found that North Las Vegas and Las Vegas have educational attainment indices of -0.84 and -0.44, respectively, while Henderson’s index was 1.08. As is captured in Table 1, school quality (based on percentage proficient) mirrored those indices, further indicating that the opportunities for a strong education—measured in terms of resources and proficiency levels—are notably less present in suburban North Las Vegas than in the overall school district, including the central city. Given that North Las Vegas’s share of non-white students was three times that of Henderson (where the share of white students is nearly double the district average), it is likely that historical racial barriers to educational and occupational opportunity on the Westside persist in more fluid forms, which reappear in the diversified suburb. Additionally, the slightly higher quality of education in Las Vegas misconstrues a reality of persisting disparities in investment that match the racial and ethnic division of space within that region.

Student characteristics by city in CCSD from 2007-08 to 2012-13 (Welsh 2019).

City	School quality	Racial or ethnic share of student body			
		Black	Hispanic	White	Asian
Las Vegas	0.58	0.13	0.44	0.29	0.09
Henderson	0.70	0.07	0.21	0.56	0.08
North Las Vegas	0.49	0.24	0.48	0.18	0.05
District average	0.59	0.13	0.42	0.32	0.08

Note. Data reformatted from Welsh (2019).

Although Las Vegas’ student demographics approximately match the district average, the higher school qualities relative to North Las Vegas may result from the concentration of invested wealth and resources in an internal suburban region: Summerlin. Although not technically a city, the Summa Corporation carefully planned and marketed Summerlin in 1990 as “a city-within-a-city,” complete with its own resort, golf courses, and community centers (Gabriel, 1991). Despite being one of the city’s newest

developments, Summerlin gained “12 public schools and 10 of the valley’s most prestigious private schools”—more schools than any other community in the state—in less than 20 years (“History,” n.d.). As such, this suburban haven, boasting low crime and poverty rates, sold itself as a refuge from the pollution and vice that clouded the Strip (Gabriel, 1991). Yet, compared to the broader city, Summerlin South’s estimated population was 24.5% whiter, with Hispanics and black populations being underrepresented by 22.6% and 7.6%, respectively (QuickFacts). Thus, Summerlin may have served as a landing point for white flight through the period of non-white suburbanization—a hypothesis which is supported by the community’s high concentration of gated communities.

Gated Communities

The gating of communities in Las Vegas may serve as a new tool of segregation in the wake of the diversification of the suburbs. Vesslinov and Le Goix (2012) found that black-white segregation between gated and non-gated communities in Las Vegas “closely resemble the traditional division between central city and suburbs,” given that levels of diversity and dissimilarity are significantly lower amongst gated communities (Vesslinov and Le Goix 2012, 213). In the Las Vegas Metro, gated communities prevail on the western and northernmost periphery of the city, as well as in the Las Vegas suburb of Henderson—Las Vegas’s only remaining dominantly white residential areas (see figure 3). That spatial arrangement supports the researchers’ argument that gated communities attracted privileged populations as “the new symbol of protected suburban living” (Vesslinov & Le Goix 2012, 218). Thus, just after minorities gained access to the suburbs, master planned and gated communities arose in Las Vegas as a new source of racialized residential exclusion.

In that sense, gated communities materialized the walls that were metaphorically built around the central city ghetto—only now the walls were more exclusively set on retaining concentrated privilege, rather than restraining the immense influx of diverse minorities, who would no longer be bound to the inner

city. Cultural geographer Rex Rowley (2015) further proffers that in Las Vegas, gates serve as a “reflection of the community’s preoccupation with the self” (Rowley 2015, 399). Rowley (2015) describes that individualism and privacy are essential to Las Vegas’ social geography, where bonds are stronger in “communities of affinity” than in those of neighborhood boundaries (Rowley 2015, 403). This is significant because outside of the city’s peripheral white communities, residential diversity has generally increased since 2000. Hence, even without gates, Las Vegasans’ communities of choice may thwart the sense of community within racially heterogeneous neighborhoods. Demonstrating the potential significance of this cultural trend, the history of educational segregation and its modern outcomes reveal how in Las Vegas, *choice* does not offer the same agency to white and non-white residents.

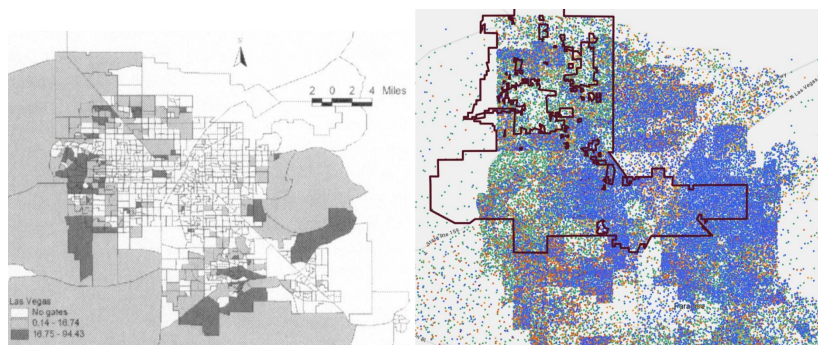


Figure 3. Share of Gated Communities per Tract (left) vs. 2019 Racial and Ethnic Population Distribution by Census Tract in Las Vegas Metro (right) Note. (Left) From Vesselinov & Le Goix (2012). (Right) From SocialExplorer.com. Each dot represents 25 individuals; blue represents the Hispanic/Latino population, yellow represents the non-Hispanic black population, red represents the Asian population, and green represents the white population.

Implications: The Fluidity of Race in Modern Educational Disparities

In the face of new barriers against residential and social integration, black and Hispanic students have suffered disproportionately in Clark County School District (CCSD) as a result of long-term, racialized constraints on personal choice. In 1968, the *Kelly v. Mason* case challenged school segregation, leading to CCSD’s “freedom-of-choice plan,” which attempted to attract white students to the Westside via “prestige schools” (Horsford et al. 2013, 13). When the plan failed, it was replaced by a mandatory busing plan, which forced black students to be bused out of the Westside to majority-white schools for all but the sixth grade year of their K-12 education. In response, some white parents sent their children to private schools for sixth grade to avoid their children going to sixth grade centers in the Westside (Horsford et al., 2013). Thus, when faced with both optional and mandatory integration plans, many white Las Vegans chose not to integrate, whether through passivity or by actively shifting to private education.

Alternatively, black students bore the burden of integration. After enduring long daily bus rides, a disrupted sense of community, educational discrimination, and harassment, the black community ultimately advocated against and defeated the busing plan in 1992 (Horsford et al., 2013). The subsequent Prime 6 Schools Plan focused more centrally on providing equal educational opportunity than on integration. Nearly two decades later, half of those schools suffered low academic rankings, and within the higher quality magnet schools, black students were underrepresented (Pak, 2018). Contemporarily, high levels of within-year student mobility—defined as students switching schools during the school year—concentrate in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods on the border between Las Vegas and North Las Vegas (Welsh, 2020). Welsh notes that such movement among low-income families is mostly precipitated by financial necessity, and thus rarely results in students transferring to higher quality schools (2019). For disadvantaged students, mobility disrupts both learning and processes of community building. Thus, despite the successful mobilization of minorities following legal Civil Rights gains and the 1990s influx of immigrants, suburban black and Hispanic populations

remain disproportionately limited by spatial mismatch between affordable housing and adequate schools.

To recap, when post-1990 immigration from Latin America and Asia flooded a deeply segregated landscape, population growth alleviated the starkness of black-white segregation.

However, the resulting outward expansion of the central city yielded evident suburban segregation—a process that reflected city-wide values of privacy and individual choice. The variations in suburban diversity levels may result from racist real estate practices and correlate with the inequitable distribution of resources in K-12 schools (Lauber, 2011; Welsh, 2020). Given the continued expansion of the city as a residential region and site of immigration, studies should be conducted to determine whether real estate practices involve steering and other discriminatory practices. Without understanding the forces behind contemporary segregation in Las Vegas, the structural barriers between communities cannot be deconstructed.

In addition to studies that consider the racial and ethnic patterns within Las Vegas' residential environment, this research demonstrates the necessity of higher levels of investment into resolving disparities in the education system. Researchers suggest that CCSD would benefit from the institution of more magnet programs, as well as the hiring of non-white teachers (Welsh, 2020; Reeves & Smith, 2021). Reeves and Smith (2021) further suggest that CCSD should take steps to accommodate Hispanic students who may deal with issues of citizenship status and English proficiency, as well as for students living in regions of lower educational attainment. By investing into these communities through the public education system, Las Vegas may begin to heal the historical disparities that were submerged during the intense period of in-migration, but have since resurfaced in what may serve as a new era of white flight.

In conclusion, this analysis of Las Vegas has attempted to introduce the significance of the quick transformation of the city's historical role from the Western reincarnation of extreme American segregation to a center of open opportunity between the 20th and 21st century. Las Vegas' development into a sprawling metropolitan presents a unique example in historical discussions

of race-making in the post-westward expansion era, as well as geographical discussions of the relationship between the construction of cities and their contemporary settlement patterns. This city’s first moniker reflects the tendency of regions in the American South to be represented as the most extreme sites or representations of racism, in a way which fails to acknowledge the maintenance and spread of racial constructions through the built environment in the 20th and 21st centuries. The persistence of disparities in investment between geographical regions of relative racial isolation in Las Vegas demonstrate that the city’s changing face and name disguise a history that deserves recognition within modern American historical discourses and requires recognition in political efforts to erode the structural barriers that limit the value of choice within spaces of long-term disinvestment.

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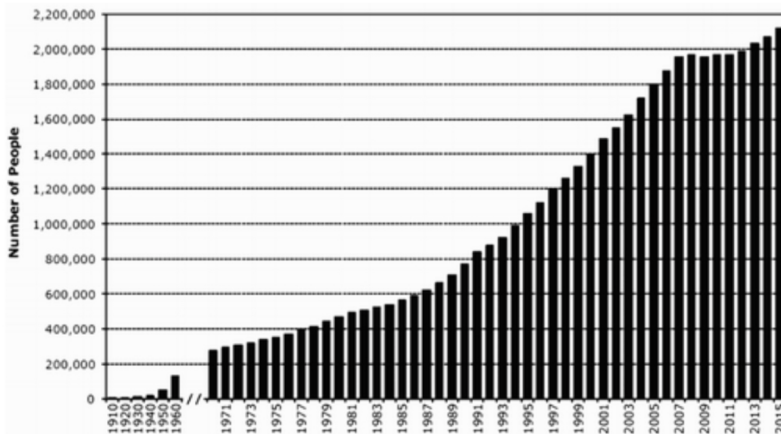
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Appendix A

Population Changes in Las Vegas. Clark County Population Growth from 1910-2015. Note. From Rowley, R. (2018). Voluntary regions and the case of Las Vegas. *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 35(1), 102-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/>

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Dissimilarity Indices (Rank and Calculation) Derived from 1990, 2000, and 2010 Census Data in Las Vegas

Dissimilarity indices	Rank (2000)	Rank (2010)	1990	2000	2010
Black-white	95th	94th	49.0%	40.4%	37.6%
Hispanic-white	57th	58th	28.8%	42.4%	42.0%
Asian-white	96th	92nd	23.3%	25.4%	28.8%

Appendix B

Segregation Over Time in Las Vegas. Note. From William H. Frey, Brookings Institution and University of Michigan Social Science Data Analysis Network’s analysis of 1990, 2000, and 2010 Census Decennial Census tract data. Retrieved from <https://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/dis/census/segregation2010.html>.