The Location of Ethnic and Racial Groups in the United States

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The distinctive regional and urban locational patterns of thirty-three ethnic groups in the United States are analyzed from two different perspectives. First, who are the numerically important groups in each region? Second, from the perspective of the groups themselves, where are they spatially concentrated? We hypothesize that the forces generating distinctive ethnic locational patterns are strongest at the time of the initial settlement; thus the longer a group has been present in the United States, the less geographically concentrated it will be. This is found to be true for most ethnic groups except blacks and American Indians, whose specific social and political situations explain their particular concentrations. However, the early settlement patterns still affect the ethnic makeup of various areas of the nation, even though the concentrations have diminished over time. Moreover, although the 1975–1980 patterns of internal migration (analyzed through a Markov Chain model) are tending to reduce some of the distinctive geographic concentrations in the nation, this will still not fully eliminate distinctive ethnic concentrations. Groups differ in their propensities to leave or enter each area in a way that reflects the existing ethnic compositions of the areas. Thus even with the massive level of internal migration in the nation, there is no evidence that the substantial ethnic linkage to region is disappearing.

The ethnic and racial makeup in 1980 of each geographic division and leading urban center of the United States—let alone that of the nation as a whole—reflects a long and continuously changing pattern of race and ethnic relations in the nation. Several factors account for this complex process. First, government policies have been very restrictive toward some groups at the same time that sizable immigration from elsewhere was encouraged—or at least permitted. Second, the sources of immigration have also varied because of changing opportunities in the United States, shifts in the push to emigrate, and the relative difficulties
and costs of transportation. Third, earlier immigrant groups have a greater impact on the current ethnic makeup of the United States than does later immigration of comparable size. Fourth, differences among groups in their intrinsic rates of natural increase, as well as the age and sex composition of the immigrants, affect the growth or contraction of a group's relative position. Finally, the ethnic composition of the United States has also been affected by the groups living in territories that were conquered, purchased, or otherwise obtained as the nation's boundaries spread outward from its initial beginnings on the Atlantic Coast.

These forces have had various impacts on the ethnic composition of each area as well as creating distinctive locational patterns for each group. Groups such as Hispanics in New Mexico and the French in Louisiana, for example, found themselves suddenly living in territories that were either conquered or purchased as the United States extended its boundaries across the continent. This, too, resulted in distinctive locational patterns when these areas and peoples were incorporated into the nation. The distinctive geographic pattern of the location of American Indians reflected the differential demise of some tribes at the hands of the whites, the resettlement patterns due to the establishment of reservations, and the efforts of American Indians to escape the white onslaughts. Since most blacks arrived in the nation as slaves, their initial locations reflected the decisions of their masters regarding the distinctive economic niches intended for them; blacks were thus concentrated initially in this country in the South.

Unique patterns of spatial distribution are also to be expected among the descendants of peoples who migrated to the New World by choice. Because the location of economic opportunities in the United States has constantly changed, groups arriving in sizable numbers at one period found different opportunity structures than those arriving at other times. Moreover, areas also differed in the kinds of opportunities actually available to immigrants. This is an important fact since the groups have varied on the aggregate in their skills, resources, and backgrounds at their time of arrival. For example, not all migrant groups were equally likely to pursue the agricultural opportunities available during the period when relatively cheap farm lands were available. The spatial distribution within the nation of each group is also affected by the proximity of their homeland to different points in the United States (e.g., Mexico vs. Cuba, or Japan vs. Sweden).

These influences not only operate for new immigrants to the United States, but they are also relevant for understanding the location of descendants of earlier immigrants. The concentration of some central and eastern European peoples in the industrial Midwest and Northeast reflects the development of heavy industry late in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century, (for example, in the automobile- and steel-