RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN UNEMPLOYMENT: A SPATIAL PERSPECTIVE

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THE GEOGRAPHIC FRAMEWORK

Geographers have only recently become aware of the fact that spatial variation in social and economic conditions are important in understanding the state of racial justice or social well-being in a nation.

The concept of social justice is concerned with distribution and retribution of society’s scarce resources and other benefits as they are allocated between different individuals and groups (Titmuss, 1962, pp. 21-35). The question of distribution is of particular importance to social well-being. The distribution of individual welfare, i.e., how many have how much (or how little), must be taken into account as well as how much there is overall (Winter et al., 1968, p. 320). To date, little attention has been given to the geography of social well-being in the United States, for geographers have been preoccupied with physical and economic conditions while most sociologists are not accustomed to thinking in spatial terms (Smith, 1973, p. xi). The contemporary social indicators movement is an important reflection of changing criteria of “relevance” with respect to the activities of social scientists and the concerns of society at large (Smith, 1973, p. xi). Yet it has attracted very little explicit attention in geographical circles, including those that emphasize social responsibility (Smith, 1973, p. xi).

Among the first geographers to view geography within the conceptual framework of social justice were David Harvey (1972) and David Smith (1973). Harvey has argued that the present spatial distribution of resources is socially unjust because the needs of the people of each territory are not met (Harvey, 1972, p. 21). Smith’s (1973) book was directly
concerned with geographical variations in social well-being in the United States. It was probably the first effort to align geography with the social indicators movement. More recently, Coates, Johnston, and Knox (1977) have examined the variation of social well-being on both a national and international scale. They described the spatial patterns of inequalities and attempted to explain why they occurred. They concluded that three sets of reasons are important. In the first, they argue that the division of labor has a clear spatial pattern. Since the rewards of an economic society (e.g., wealth, status, and power) are differentially distributed, with the working class generally under-privileged, this spatial division of labor produces a spatial pattern of inequalities.

The central issue of this paper is how to deal with the question of unemployment when individuals are differentiated with respect to race as well as geographic location.

It has been well documented that in economic good times and economic hard times, unemployment rates of Blacks and Hispanics in the United States have remained much higher than the rates of whites (Green, Darden, Hirt, Simmons, Tenbrunsel, Thomas, Thomas, and Thomas, 1981). Among Blacks, for example, unemployment rates have been, on the average, twice as high as those for whites since racial data on unemployment became available in 1948 (Table 1). But is racial difference in unemployment at the national level also prevalent to the same degree at the metropolitan level? In other words, are there spatial variations in racial differences in unemployment rates in large metropolitan areas? Which metropolitan areas have the least racial inequality, and which ones have the most? What is the regional distribution of unemployment patterns? Finally, why do spatial variations in racial differences in unemployment exist, i.e., are there correlates between unemployment differences and other socioeconomic and demographic variables?

It is the purpose of this paper to address these questions by assessing racial differences in unemployment rates from 1974 to 1979 in the largest metropolitan areas of the United States. Based on data availability, this study is limited to an assessment of racial differences in unemployment between Blacks and whites and Hispanics and whites.

Data and Method

Data for this paper were obtained from the U.S. Department of Labor's Current Population Surveys (CPS), sample surveys of households con-