Immigrant Segregation in the Southwest

Immigration, especially immigration from Latin America, has long been a contentious issue in the United States, especially today given President Trump's divisive rhetoric on the topic. As current politics create a nation with growing xenophobia and hostility towards Hispanic immigrants, one might expect immigrants from Latin America to be segregated at a residential level similarly to other oppressed groups in the US. This does happen to some immigrant groups in cities, leading to ethnic enclaves like Chinatowns or Little Italies. However, Latin American immigrants are actually relatively unsegregated. In order to understand this, we have to examine the specific geography of immigration in the US.

While many scholars have written about new immigrant destinations in states like North Carolina, Georgia, or Idaho, Hispanic immigrants are still heavily concentrated in the southwest. Texas, California, and Nevada, for example, all remain important destinations for Latin American immigrants to the US and Hispanic immigrants make up a large share of the population in these states. The only other states with as high a share of immigrants are Florida (mostly because of the large Cuban presence in Miami), as well as New York and New Jersey.

Table 1: The eight states with the highest shares of immigrants from Latin America

State	Percent Foreign-Born (Latin America)
Arizona	8.329
California	13.67
Florida	15.45
Nevada	10.9
New Jersey	10.17
New Mexico	7.318
New York	11.06
Texas	11.57

The really apparent trend in immigrant settlement dynamics is not just one of immigrants leaving the southwest, but moving to the suburbs. The 2000s were marked by immigrants moving to the suburbs at high rates, especially among Latin American and Caribbean immigrants (Farrell 2014). This has had real implications on housing segregation, as large groups of nonwhites move into parts of cities that are typically associated with whiteness. An article in the journal Urban Studies shows that immigrants who live in suburbs tend to be less segregated from the white population than their coethnics who live in urban cores (Farrell 2014). In my analysis, I wanted to explore housing segregation in the southwest for Hispanic immigrants and how it varies across the region.

To do this, I used what's called a dissimilarity index. Each county in the US is divided into census tracts - smaller units of about 4,500 people (sometimes smaller in rural counties) that are often defined along a geographic or cultural boundary. The dissimilarity indices show what percent of Hispanic immigrants in a county would have to move in order for each tract within the county to have the same proportion of immigrants. This results in a value between 0 and 1 where 0 is total integration and 1 is total segregation. I calculated the dissimilarity of Latin American immigrants from all other residents for each county in the southwest (which I defined as California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado, and Texas) except for a handful of extremely small or rural counties with only one census tract.

I followed this by examining how this compares between big cities and more rural environments. The census divides counties into metropolitan, micropolitan, and non-core (rural) classifications. Metropolitan counties are those which contain a city of at least 50,000 or are linked to such a city with a commuting workforce. Micropolitan counties are defined in a similar vein, except revolving around smaller cities of between 10,000 and 50,000 people. What's leftover after metro and micro regions are defined are then classified as rural. An important note about these classifications is that highly rural counties can and often are labled as metro if they have a substantial number of people who commute to a city.
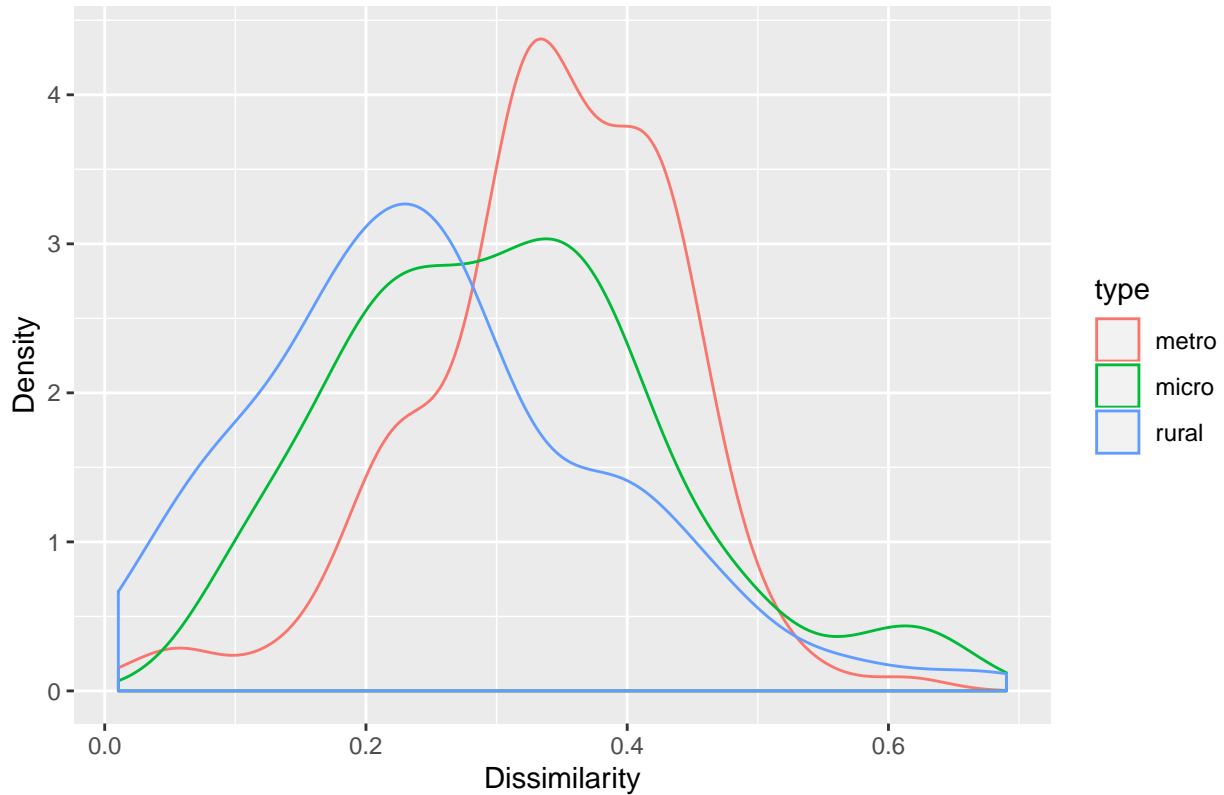

As could be expected, metropolitan counties in the southwest (which includes suburban counties) tend to have greater levels of immigrant segregation than their rural counterparts. Interestingly, micropolitan counties appear to have a bimodal distribution, with some counties sharing characteristics with rural counties and with other following more closely to the metro curve.

However, these dissimilarity indices are actually relatively small. For perspective, the dissimilarity index of black residents in Manhattan is 0.57, and in Brooklyn it's 0.71. A good case study for how relatively low immigrant segregation is compared to other groups is Los Angeles County.

Immigrant Neighborhoods in Los Angeles County
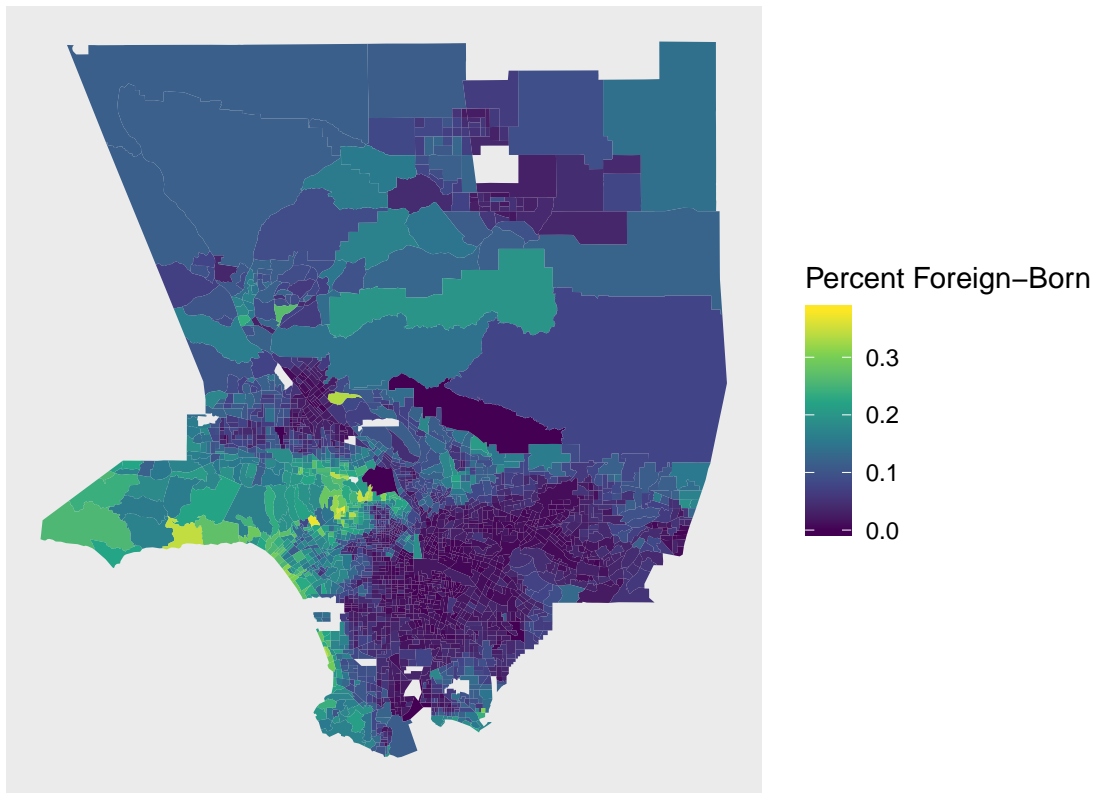
Hispanic Neighborhoods in Los Angeles County
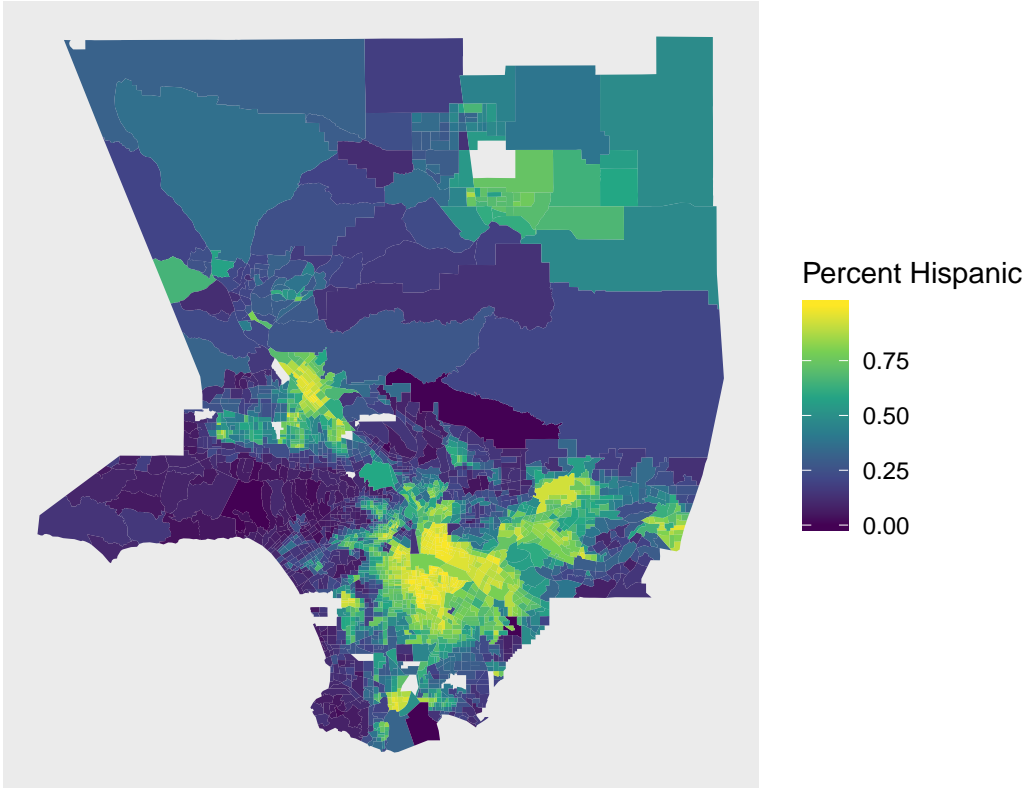
While LA county has an immigrant dissimilarity of just under 0.4, on the higher end of even the studied metropolitan counties, the number only shows weak to moderate segregation. Most of LA county has neither a very high or very low immigrant population, but somewhere in between. This is contrasted with broader Hispanic segregation, in which the division between predominantly Hispanic and non-Hispanic neighborhoods is stark and clearly defined. LA county also shows the rural/urban difference in segregation. In the rural parts of northern LA county, where the census tracts are largest, the immigrant population is less segregated than in the actual city of LA. Only a couple of tracts stand out as having more immigrants than their neighbors, but even these tracts are less defined than central Los Angeles.

The broad difference in the relative segregation of immigrants and Hispanics that can be seen in LA county is even more pronounced in rural places. Despite the impressively low levels of immigrant segregation in rural counties, one study found that, while declining, the average dissimilarity of Hispanics compared to whites in rural counties with established Hispanic populations was nearly 0.55 as of 2010 (Lichter, Parisi, and Taquino 2016). Meanwhile, only four rural counties in the entire southwest have an immigrant dissimilarity this high. Since suburbanization can only account for the lowered immigrant dissimilarities in metro counties, it remains unclear why this difference exists in rural areas as well.

References:

Farrell, C. R. (2016). Immigrant suburbanisation and the shifting geographic structure of metropolitan segregation in the United States. Urban Studies, 53(1), 57–76. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014558537

Lichter, D.T., Parisi, D. and Taquino, M.C. (2016), Emerging Patterns of Hispanic Residential Segregation: Lessons from Rural and Small-Town America. Rural Sociology, 81: 483-518. doi:10.1111/ruso.12108