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Daniel Trudeau

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THE PERSISTENCE OF SEGREGATION IN BUFFALO, NEW YORK:
COMER VS. CISNEROS AND GEOGRAPHIES OF RELOCATION
DECISIONS AMONG LOW-INCOME BLACK HOUSEHOLDS¹

*Daniel Trudeau*²
Department of Geography
Macalester College

Abstract: Debates about the causes of segregation continue to consider the role that own-race preferences have in understanding the persistence of racial residential segregation in American cities. In this paper, I offer an alternative to the own-race preference model. I argue that segregation of low-income Black households from Whites persists in Buffalo, New York, because the spatial rootedness of Blacks' survival strategies leads households to choose housing in the central city, where their social networks and most Black households live. I illustrate this argument by exploring the multiple reasons for why a group of African American households, who were prompted to move through the settlement of a high-profile housing discrimination lawsuit, chose to relocate to neighborhoods in the central city in Buffalo. I adopt a context-sensitive perspective in making the argument and further argue that such approaches are ultimately useful in capturing the complex reasons that underlie the persistence of segregation.

INTRODUCTION

Racial residential segregation has declined in its intensity over several decades, yet it still remains to be a defining feature in the geography of many American cities (Johnston et al., 2003; Logan et al., 2004). In particular, the intransigence of segregation between African Americans and Whites across many cities and over time has been cause for research to explain why segregation continues to define the social geography of American cities. The ongoing debate concerning why Black-White residential segregation persists continues to pivot around three theories that attempt to explain the causes of segregation: (1) segregation is a result of economic differences; (2) segregation is the outcome of racial discrimination; (3) segregation is the expression of people's singular preference to live among their own race—that is, segregation is a voluntary phenomenon. As part of the debate there is disagreement about how to interpret the causal role of own-race preferences. Clark (2002, p. 239) acknowledges that “there are strongly contested positions between those who view preferences and ethnocentrism as simply subtle forms

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²Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Daniel Trudeau, Department of Geography, Macalester College, 1600 Grand Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105; telephone: 651-696-6872; fax: 651-696-6116; e-mail: trudeau@macalester.edu

of discrimination and those who emphasize the fact that residential behaviors are a real reflection of expressed desire to be with groups and ethnic neighbors of a similar background.”

In this paper, I engage this thread of the debate from the position that own-race preference theory does not sufficiently incorporate relational and structural factors, which are ultimately important to understanding why Black-White segregation persists in American cities, especially for low-income Blacks. I argue that people’s housing decisions are embedded in social relations that constrain, enable, and ultimately influence where people move. I illustrate this argument by examining why a group of African American households relocated in the central city in Buffalo, New York—a move that reproduced Black-White segregation. I develop this argument by examining survey and interview data I collected in 2000 concerning the relocation decisions of low-income racial minority households who participated in a housing discrimination remediation program. The program was created through the consent decree of *Comer vs. Cisneros*, a class-action housing discrimination lawsuit in Buffalo. Rather than explain the households’ relocation choices as the singular expression of own-race preferences, I find that the persistence of segregation is due to the spatial rootedness of the households’ social networks, which reflect existing patterns of segregation in Buffalo.

In order to address relational and structural factors, I evaluate the housing and neighborhood relocation decisions of poor Blacks in Buffalo by applying what Gilbert (1998) describes as “survival strategies of the poor.” These are strategies that help households adapt to external stresses (such as racism) and to help preserve heads’ of household independence and ability to manage tasks necessary for the reproduction of the household, including work and domestic demands. The survival strategies of low-income households often include drawing on social networks that are spatially rooted and concentrated in place. A focus on the social context and embeddedness of households’ decisions about where to live enhances understanding of why people choose to locate in neighborhoods that are dominated by their own race.

EXPLAINING THE PERSISTENCE OF THE COLOR LINE IN AMERICAN CITIES

Scholars of urban life have long debated the causes of ethnic and racial group concentration in urban environments. The persistent segregation of African Americans over time and throughout different cities has led to the argument that Black segregation is different from the processes that have separated other ethnic and immigrant groups in American cities (Massey, 1985; Darden, 1987; Massey and Denton, 1993). Focusing on the persistence of Black-White segregation in contemporary urban contexts, Darden (1987) identified three explanatory themes that coalesced from the Black-White segregation literature: segregation as a result of racial discrimination, as a product of economic differences, and as an outcome of preferences to live among people of the same race and background. In the years since Darden’s *conspectus*, abstractions about the causes of race segregation have continued to revolve around these themes.

The reasons behind the segregation of Blacks in inner-city areas have been actively debated. The processes of White flight that saw the movement of many White households to suburban locales are certainly part of the explanation. Yet, it is important to consider why so many African Americans have remained and continue to remain in the central

cities of many metropolitan areas. Appealing to the role of class, Wilson (1987) argues that a Black underclass emerged in America's central cities because of the out-migration of Black middle and upper classes. Empirical studies of the segregation between higher- and lower-income Blacks suggest, however, that the separation of higher-income Blacks is more imagined than lived, even in Black-dominated suburban areas (Phelan and Schneider, 1996).

Studies by Kain (1987), Taylor (1990), Farley (1991), and Patillo-McCoy (2000) found that the relocation of Black middle class households during the 1970s and 80s advanced the frontier separating Black and White residential spaces. In particular, Farley (1991) concluded that higher- and lower-income Blacks experienced equivalent degrees of segregation from Whites (in fact, he argues that class segregation within racial groups has not appreciably changed since the 1950s). Fainstein (1993, p. 389) also emphasizes that "the economic situation of all African Americans...reflects the continued racial disadvantage across the entire Black class structure...[not] just the impoverishment of lower-class Blacks." Fainstein's work as well as Massey and Denton's (1993) germinal evaluation of segregation in America heralded scholarship that focused on the ways in which race, specifically racial discrimination, is a salient factor for understanding Black-White segregation. The work of these scholars has inspired a host of studies that have highlighted the role of racial discrimination by empirically illustrating the ways in which class differences have failed to account for observed patterns of Black-White segregation (e.g., Darden, 1995; Farley, 1995; Sugrue, 1996; Boswell and Cruz Baez, 1997; Darden et al., 1997; Thomas, 1997; Freeman, 2000).

Debates about the relative significance of race or class factors in explanations of segregation continue in the literature. An exchange between Clark and Ware (1997) and Darden and Kamel (2000) offers one example. In Clark and Ware's (1997) analysis of segregation in Los Angeles, they cite evidence that suggests higher-income Blacks experience less segregation than their lower-income counterparts. Darden and Kamel (2000) responded with evidence that illustrates how racial discrimination is a determining factor in sustaining racial segregation in Detroit. It may be that the relative salience of the different factors that explain segregation depends on the histories and geographies of specific places (Farley et al., 1997). Clark (2002), for instance, argues that there is a different segregation dynamic at work in places like Southern California, where class status and ethnocentric attitudes play a much more important role in defining racial segregation. Clark notes that these trends are particularly visible in West Coast cities, but their emergence is not geographically limited. Specifically, Clark (1989, 1992, 2002) argues that it is people's desire to live among others of similar appearance and backgrounds that determines the current patterns of racial segregation.

There has been limited support for the own-race preferences explanation, however. Zubrinsky and Bobo (1996) found that Whites and Blacks do hold own-race preferences, but these preferences play only a small role in the persistence of segregation. Farley et al. (1997, p. 796) echo this finding, but concede that "preferences interact with the other two factors—discrimination in the marketing of housing and economic differences—in reinforcing high segregation levels." Boswell et al. (1998) support this finding and argue that for Blacks in Miami, choices to move into Black-dominated neighborhoods were informed by perceptions of discrimination by Whites and Hispanics. Many preferred to live in more integrated neighborhoods, but perceptions of possible discrimination led

them to choose otherwise. These studies highlight the enduring significance of race and discrimination—or perceptions of discrimination—for understanding the processes that drive segregation. Still, scholars continue to debate the relative efficacy of one theme over the other, drawing definite boundaries around the different camps that rival to explain current segregation patterns.

Clark (2002) has responded to the critiques of own-race preference theory by representing discrimination- and class-based explanations as too simple and out of touch with current conditions of race relations and economic mobility. In Clark's view, current perceptions of racism see discrimination through the now obsolete lens of overt Jim Crow-style injustices. Racism and discrimination matter much less now, he argues, and so alternative explanations are needed to account for the persistence of segregation. Clark (2002) advances the perspective that people's ethnocentric perceptions and own-race preferences are perhaps the most influential characteristics when evaluating the causes of racial residential separation in cities. Clark's recent (2002) work with the Multi-City Urban Inequality survey cites the tendency of individuals to trust and look more favorably upon people of their own race as evidence to explain why racial groups have maintained their separation in many American cities.

As these divergent positions are repeated and researched in academic discussions, it is evident that there is an earnest effort to be quite precise about why segregation continues to occur after the passage of a number of civil rights laws, reforms to ensure fair housing, and at least a superficial softening of the hard edges of race relations. The outcomes of these debates do have important stakes. Darden and Kamel (2000) point out that research on segregation will likely influence the degree to which public policies concerned with segregation focus on overcoming barriers connected with inequality based on class or race. In contrast, Clark (2002) sees research on segregation as important for informing decisions of whether there should be any public policy advocating racial residential integration. In Clark's (2002) view, if people prefer to live in segregated neighborhoods, then public policies will have little effect short of forced integration. Given these stakes, it is important to evaluate further the paradigm that explains segregation as a voluntary phenomenon.

PREFERENCES, HOUSING CHOICES, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF EMBEDDEDNESS

In the debates about race and residential separation, the own-race preference model has received renewed support. Despite this support, I argue that claims for the efficacy of own-race preferences are problematic in at least two ways. First, there is a methodological problem in that empirical support for the own-race preference position has been marshaled from data that ask about people's preferences in abstract situations. In two separate studies that have been used to support the own-race preference explanation (e.g., the Multi-ethnic Urban Inequality study as used in Clark's [2002] analysis and a Los Angeles School District study also used by Clark [1992]), preferences are gauged in ways that do not attend to the specific contexts in which people select residential locations. In these studies, own-race preferences are gauged in a few different ways: (1) by comparing a person's answers to questions on whether they would feel comfortable living in hypothetical neighborhoods of various racial distributions; (2) by asking among what mix of

different racial groups would a person most prefer to live; and by (3) observing relocation decisions to find “revealed preferences.” These methods are problematic because they do not examine the real-life processes whereby people make specific housing decisions—decisions that are always mediated by constraints and available resources.

Second, there is an ontological problem with the own-race preference model. This perspective assumes that individuals are able to act freely and willfully on their unmediated preferences.³ The view of an autonomous individual and unmediated agency in housing decisions is problematic because it does not consider the often complex contexts in which actors operate. As a result, the “embeddedness” of actual housing decisions is not brought into specific consideration by studies that seek to fix the efficacy of own-race preferences.

Housing choices are indeed complex decisions that are set in contexts defined by social relations, home-work links, social networks, economic constraints, and housing availability. It is completely valid to argue that Blacks choose the neighborhoods they live in—moving is usually a voluntary process—but it is also important to recognize that housing choices are made under conditions over which people have little or no control. Therefore, it seems important to highlight the ways in which housing choices are contingent on material circumstances and conditioned by social relationships. By focusing on the ways in which agency is mediated, I mean to emphasize that, especially for low-income minority groups, housing decisions are more about the ability to exercise power than they are about preferences to live among their own race. This later perspective is already questionable because many African Americans and members of other minority groups do not have the power to act on own-race preferences, whether they exist or not.

Gilbert’s (1998) work on the survival strategies of the poor offers a useful way to conceptualize the importance of embeddedness for studies of segregation with respect to housing decisions and housing mobility. By embeddedness, I mean to employ Granovetter’s (1985) notion that social actors are constantly embedded in a field of social relations that mediate individuals’ behavior. This constellation of social relationships is a resource that enables and delimits the decisions of social actors in their opportunity structures. Gilbert (1998) and others (Dyck, 1989; DeSena, 1994; Peake, 1997) have found that social networks are an important part of people’s survival strategies, influencing where they live and work. Social networks affect where people live and work because they are embedded in economic, gendered, and racial structures that shape people’s access to jobs and housing (Hanson and Pratt, 1995; Cope, 1998; Chapple, 2001).

The spatiality of these networks are important when considering why some people remain rooted in a place and why others realize a greater degree of spatial mobility in their housing decisions. Gilbert’s (1998) research on the spatial rootedness of low-income White and Black women in Worcester illustrates how place-based personal networks act as important resources that add to women’s economic security. Yet these

³Clark (1992, p. 458) does attempt to “determine preferences independent of constraints” by asking respondents to identify “a house or apartment [they] can afford.” He admits that this attempt to recognize constraints “is not perfect.” Still, the conception of constraints is limited as it is based solely on material barriers and does not include social constraints.

networks can also act as spatial anchors. In Gilbert's (1998, p. 604) study, most women "were making their employment decisions from a fixed residential location." Their ties to a place further extended to childcare decisions. Most women connected to childcare through their personal networks, which reinforced their spatial rootedness. As a result of this tendency, both Gilbert (1998) and Peake (1997) observe that African American households' reliance on place-based networks leads them to choose to remain in the same or nearby neighborhoods.

It is important to acknowledge that housing choices are made to enable household reproduction, often under harsh economic, sexist, and racist structures. These decisions cannot be explained as the singular expression of own-race preferences or expressions of ethnocentricity. In order to understand why Black-White segregation persists in American cities—especially why Blacks continue to remain in inner-city areas—housing choices need to be seen as more than geographic outcomes of an unproblematic and abstract preference. The rationales that inform housing choices need to be evaluated as well as the conditions that structure and constrain the decision-making process. Otherwise, preferences become a sort of black box, which putatively account for housing and neighborhood decisions. In order to understand the extent to which own-race preferences can explain the persistence of Black-White segregation, the embeddedness of housing decisions ought to be included when examining why people choose to move to neighborhoods dominated by their own race. The remediation efforts of the *Comer vs. Cisneros* case in Buffalo, NY, offer an opportunity to do this.

COMER VS. CISNEROS, SEGREGATION AND RACISM IN BUFFALO

In 1989, the Buffalo Municipal Housing Authority (BMHA) was formally charged under the class-action lawsuit of *Comer vs. Cisneros* with discriminatory practices that resulted in the systematic separation of Blacks and Whites into disparate places in the metropolitan area. According to the plaintiffs' arguments, Blacks and other racial minorities in Buffalo experienced limited access to and long waits for Section 8 assistance, whereas White residents were provided many more affordable housing opportunities (Kraus, 2000). Section 8 vouchers are government subsidies that help low-income households increase their ability to choose and pay for housing in the rental market. The vouchers assist eligible households so that they do not spend more than 30% of their income on housing.⁴ The vouchers are not universally applicable. They may be applied to housing with rents no greater than the 40th percentile of the area's fair market rent and landlords' acceptance of the voucher remains voluntary.

In 1997, this class-action housing discrimination lawsuit was settled through a consent decree in favor of the plaintiffs. The consent decree led to the creation of a housing discrimination remediation program, the goals of which were to decrease minorities' exposure to environments rife with racial isolation and poverty. These goals were to be achieved by providing additional Section 8 vouchers to minorities in Buffalo as well as

⁴Only households who do not make more than 50% of the median annual family income in a metropolitan area are eligible. In the case of Buffalo in the year 2000, eligible households with four members could not exceed an annual income of \$23,450.

housing and legal counsel to help address obstacles that have conventionally impeded free choice. In addition to the rent subsidies, “mobility counseling” was provided to the Section 8 recipients to assist with households’ relocation decisions and application of Section 8 vouchers. Mobility counseling is a service that endeavors to mitigate discrimination by preparing the prospective renter with basic knowledge about renters’ rights and fair-housing law. In connection with the consent decree, Section 8 recipients were also given access to transportation and child care in order to facilitate the process of finding housing. These programs and services were managed by Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc (HOME), a civil rights organization in Buffalo.

The Section 8 vouchers provided many minority households with opportunities to change their residential situations. My examination of the relocation patterns of recipient households shows that the segregation of African Americans persisted. I conducted surveys and interviews with a sample of the recipients who moved in order to understand the different sets of circumstances that led to the households’ relocation decisions that reproduced segregation patterns in Buffalo. I concentrate on low-income African American households in order to sharpen analytical focus on the role of power, the everyday presence of racism, access to social and material resources, and housing opportunity structures in understanding the persistence of Black-White segregation. Before I discuss in greater detail my research of the geographies of relocation decisions related to *Comer vs. Cisneros*, I first describe the broader urban context in which the relocation decisions were made.

Racial Divisions in Buffalo

Buffalo, New York has earned the unfortunate distinction of being one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States (Harrison and Weinberg, 1992; Massey and Denton, 1993; Lewis Mumford Center for Comparative Urban Research, 2001). Residential segregation between Blacks and Whites has been a defining feature of the city’s social geography for several decades (Table 1). Measurements of dissimilarity and isolation show that segregation in the Buffalo metropolitan area is considerably high—indices with values above 0.5 are characteristic of a relatively segregated living environment (Massey and Denton, 1988). Yet, suburban populations in Buffalo experience comparatively lower levels of segregation. In particular, the Black isolation indices are significantly lower in suburban municipalities. This is primarily due to the disproportionate numbers of Whites and Blacks living in Buffalo’s suburban areas.⁵

The low proportion of the Black population in suburban municipalities is also indicative of the deep racial divisions in this metropolitan area. In 2000, only 11.2% of the entire African American population of the metropolitan area lived outside of the City of Buffalo, a figure that has marginally increased over the past 20 years. The current geography of these racial divisions is represented in Figure 1, which shows the clustering of the African American population in the North and East ends of the City of Buffalo. The

⁵Liebertson (1981) notes that the isolation index will be low if the population of a minority group is small in comparison to the dominant group.

TABLE 1. TWO DECADES OF RACIAL SEGREGATION IN BUFFALO

	1980	1990	2000
Metropolitan population (all races)	1,015,472	968,532	950,265
White non-Hispanic	886,457	823,521	768,476
Black non-Hispanic	101,969	108,337	120,951
Dissimilarity index	0.82	0.82	0.80
Isolation index	0.69	0.69	0.68
Central-city population (all races)	357,870	328,385	292,648
White non-Hispanic	249,120	207,467	152,109
Black non-Hispanic	94,262	99,707	107,371
Dissimilarity index	0.74	0.73	0.70
Isolation index	0.68	0.73	0.74
Suburban population (all races)	657,602	640,147	657,617
White non-Hispanic	637,337	616,054	616,367
Black non-Hispanic	7,707	8,630	13,580
Dissimilarity index	0.57	0.62	0.59
Isolation index	0.17	0.19	0.18
Proportion of Blacks in suburbs	7.6%	8.0%	11.2%

Sources: Geolytics (1999, 2001, 2002).

suburban tracts in which Blacks live are also close to this center, thus showing that the Black population is highly concentrated on the metropolitan scale.

African Americans in Buffalo are also at a material disadvantage compared to Whites. Overall, Blacks' annual earnings are significantly less than Whites', and Blacks are more than twice as likely as Whites to experience poverty conditions (Table 2). There is also a distinctive geography to this pattern of income inequality. About 91% of Black households live in the City of Buffalo, whereas about 78% of White households live in suburban municipalities. Furthermore, Blacks living in the central city tend to earn less than Blacks living in the suburbs; the same relationship holds between central city and suburban White households. Considering the whole metropolitan area, Black-White segregation within the same income group also remains fairly high, and segregation levels generally increase with successive income levels. When considering only the City of Buffalo, this trend of increasing segregation holds. But in the suburban municipalities, segregation decreases with higher income groups. While the dissimilarity between White and Black suburban households earning more than \$75,000 per year remains relatively high (58.4), there is clear evidence of a decline in levels of segregation. This suggests that a relatively small number of wealthier Black households have been able to translate their economic mobility into some of the housing opportunities that wealthier White households enjoy. This phenomenon occurs in the context of a declining White population (as shown in Table 1), new housing expansion at the periphery, and a highly clustered Black

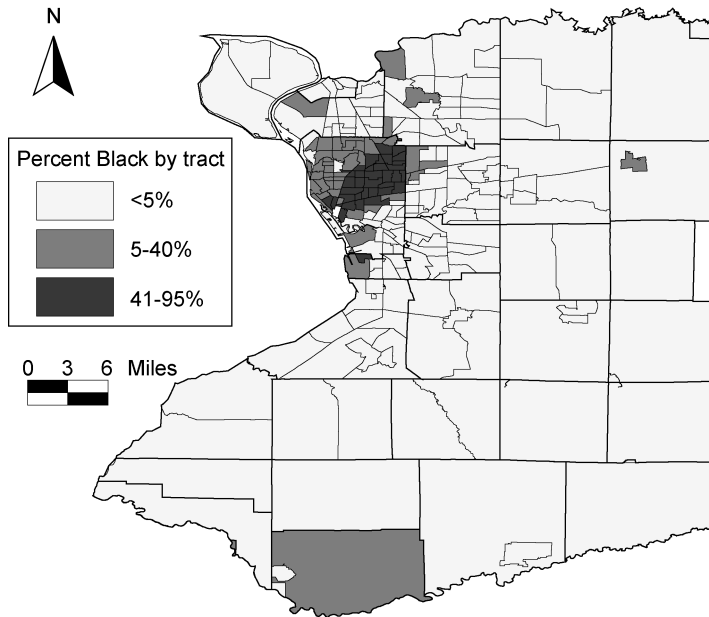


Fig. 1. The concentration of Blacks in the central city of Buffalo.

population. It may be that the lower levels of segregation between high-income households in the suburbs have been observed at a moment of geographical and demographic transition; future research will show if this pattern holds.

The recognition of racial discrimination in the *Comer vs. Cisneros* consent decree suggests that African Americans in Buffalo experience racism in their everyday lives. Racism is an insidious social force that can take multiple forms. For instance, in a report for *The Buffalo News*, Montgomery (1991) describes how young Black men attempt to avoid traveling through Buffalo's suburban White spaces because police officers often apprehend them when they venture into such areas. There are also perceptions among Blacks that there are particular all-White neighborhoods in the City of Buffalo that are not safe for racial minorities, as one of the interview respondents explains:

There are some areas that we are not allowed to go into, because [the White residents] feel as though that, if we start to move in, the housing and the neighborhood will go down [because] we'll bring our loud music and...the stereotypical things with us. From when I was growing up, it's always been that way in [the South end of Buffalo] and a couple of Blacks have moved into that area to be chased out, but to me that shows their ignorance not ours. It still goes on, it's not that out in the open, but it's still there.⁶

⁶Respondent # 151, personal interview, August 14, 2000.

**TABLE 2. RACE AND ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME
BY PROPORTION OF POPULATION FOR BUFFALO IN 2000**

	<\$15,000 (%)	\$15,000– 34,999 (%)	\$35,000– 75,000 (%)	>\$75,000 (%)	Total households
Metropolitan area					
White	14.8	26.6	37.4	21.2	318,989
Black	38.8	30.8	22.7	7.7	47,922
Dissimilarity index (within income group)	54.1	71.6	78.9	74.7	
Central city					
White	26.2	32.5	29.8	11.5	71,413
Black	40.4	31.8	21.3	6.5	43,499
Dissimilarity index (within income group)	64.5	68.5	74.9	74.5	
Suburban areas					
White	11.5	24.8	39.6	24.1	247,576
Black	22.7	22.1	36.2	19.0	4,423
Dissimilarity (within income group)	68.9	65.6	63.2	58.4	

Source: Geolytics (2002).

Housing discrimination is also a frequent occurrence. In the wake of the 1997 *Comer vs. Cisneros* consent decree, HOME received approximately 300 complaints of discrimination per year from Buffalo residents and on average two-thirds of the complaints had legal merit.⁷ In one case, a landlord in a Buffalo suburb was convicted of housing discrimination after he had admitted to an undercover fair housing investigator that he “would not rent to coloreds in an all-White neighborhood” (National Fair Housing Advocate, 1997). As racialized subjects, the African American people in this study experience multiple forms of racism in their everyday lives, which affects where they live, travel, and work in Buffalo.

Research Methods and Data

Comer vs. Cisneros resulted in a consent decree whereby BMHA agreed to make available 1600 additional Section 8 vouchers to racial minority households, which would be released over five years. The first 800 vouchers were made available in 1999.

⁷Personal communication with David Wright, Associate Director of Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Inc., in 2004.

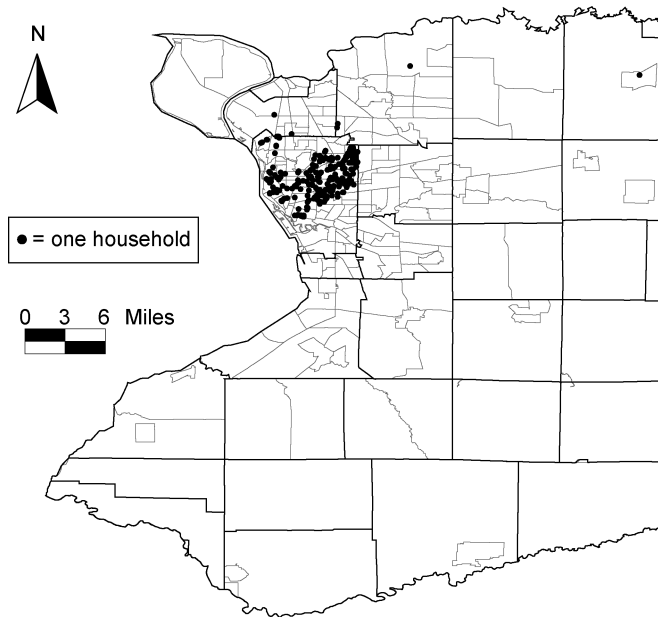


Fig. 2. Original locations of Comer voucher recipients.

Hereafter, I refer to the Section 8 vouchers provided through *Comer vs. Cisneros* as Comer vouchers. As part of the consent decree, funding was made available for one organization, HOME, to monitor who received the Comer vouchers, whether recipients used them to relocate, and where recipients chose to live. This information was made available to me in 2000, a full year after the first 800 Comer vouchers were distributed and some of the recipient households used the vouchers to move to different housing.

Through HOME, I was able to obtain demographic and geographic data for several hundred of the households that received Comer vouchers, including their current and previous addresses. With the assistance of HOME, I distributed mail surveys to 300 households that had used their voucher to relocate. I effectively reached 248 households after accounting for returned surveys and undeliverable addresses. I have limited the relocation analysis to these 248 households for which I have confirmed addresses. I received 61 complete and valid surveys for a response rate of 24.5%. As part of the survey, I invited response from individuals willing to participate in follow-up interviews. I conducted 13 in-person interviews with Comer voucher recipients who were employed in either full- or part-time jobs. Through the surveys and interviews, I asked respondents about the circumstance and interests that motivated their decisions to choose specific neighborhoods. Responses from the surveys and interviews illustrate how the spatiality of poor Blacks' survival strategies and the rootedness of their social networks influence housing decisions that reproduce segregation patterns.

The relocation trends of these 248 households show that patterns of segregation were, for the most part, reproduced. The locations of 248 Comer voucher households in 1999, before they moved, are depicted in Figure 2, and Figure 3 shows the locations of these households in 2000, after they had moved. The indices of segregation for these

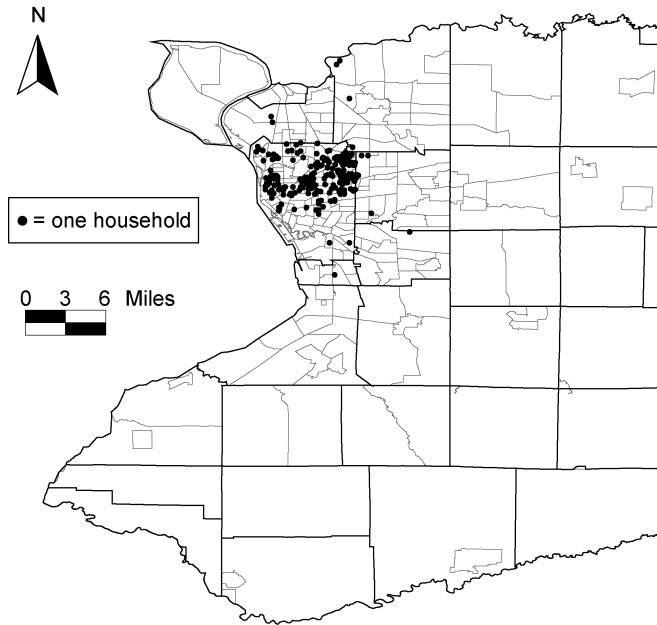


Fig. 3. The geography of relocation decisions.

households before and after relocation are recorded in Table 3. This case is consistent with the findings of other studies of relocation enabled by Section 8, which show that relocating populations in general do not move to less segregated neighborhoods (Hartung and Henig, 1997; Fischer, 1999; Kingsley et al., 2003). Considering that one of the principal intents and expectations of making the Section 8 vouchers available was to mitigate racial segregation in Buffalo, these results are cause for investigation into the processes that led to the reproduction of racial residential segregation among the Comer voucher recipients.

A second principal aim of the Section 8 remediation effort was to move households out of impoverished areas in Buffalo. This goal was accomplished—Table 3 shows that households with Comer vouchers did, on average, move into census tracts with lower rates of poverty—a finding that is consistent with other evaluations of Section 8 (Goering et al., 1995; Goering, 2000; Kingsley et al., 2003). It should be noted, however, that this occurred within the context of reproducing existing patterns of racial segregation in Buffalo. Furthermore, nearly all households remained in the city of Buffalo. Few used the Comer vouchers to move to suburban locales. In fact, the average distance moved for recipients in the sample was 1.5 miles.

Section 8 vouchers may enhance recipients' residential mobility, but do Section 8 vouchers also place spatial limits on residential mobility? Section 8 vouchers do limit access to housing in metropolitan areas in two ways. First, landlords are not legally compelled to accept Section 8 vouchers. Inquiries into why landlords elect not to accept Section 8 vouchers indicate that discrimination (Hartung and Henig, 1997) and prejudiced associations of Section 8 recipients with domestic violence, gang participation, and

TABLE 3. SEGREGATION AND POVERTY EXPOSURE FOR COMER VOUCHER RECIPIENTS

	Before relocation	After relocation
Household location		
City of Buffalo	98.4%	96.3%
Suburban municipalities	1.6%	3.7%
Average poverty rate of census tracts	24.9%	34.3%
Black-White dissimilarity index	67.3	70.7
Black-White isolation index	72.4	70.4
<i>n</i> = 248		

Sources: Trudeau and Cope (2003); U.S. Census Bureau (2003).

substance abuse (Popkin et al., 2002) explain why some landlords do not make their rental housing available. Second, Section 8 vouchers cannot be applied to rental housing units above the 40th percentile of the area's fair market rent.

There is not sufficient evidence to suggest that, in Buffalo at least, these limitations prohibit access to most locations in the metropolitan area. Currently, there are no geographical data about landlords' decisions to accept or decline the use of Section 8; thus the spatial dimension of this constraint cannot be addressed. Yet, the spatial dimension of the fair market rent limits can be addressed. In 2000, the 40th percentile of the fair market rent was \$510 for a two-bedroom rental unit. Fair market rent includes rent and the cost of basic utilities and is comparable to gross median rent, a statistic that is recorded in the census of housing. Geographical variations of the gross median rent of census tracts in Buffalo are displayed in Figure 4, which shows a general pattern of radial sectors, with the median cost of rental housing increasing with distance from the central city. While the rents may be higher in the suburbs, the median figures do not exempt access via rent limitations of Section 8. The median gross rent may be above \$510 in the suburbs, but affordable rental housing is (theoretically) available in those areas. As Figure 3 suggests, Comer voucher households have been able to rent housing in areas that Figure 4 marks as above the 40th percentile of the fair market rent. Thus, while Section 8 does have constraints, they have not determined where Comer voucher recipients relocated.

In order to understand why households with Comer vouchers relocated in central city areas, it is important to account for their demographic composition. Most of the Comer voucher recipients are households headed by African American women (Table 4). The profile constructed in Table 4 suggests that the "average" recipients are mid-30s single Black mothers with two dependents. The high incidence of Black women in the sample is consistent with demographic characteristics of Buffalo's poor: approximately 44% of all non-White persons living in poverty in the City of Buffalo are Black women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003). These characteristics are important to consider because they suggest that the households in this study experience everyday struggles that stem from

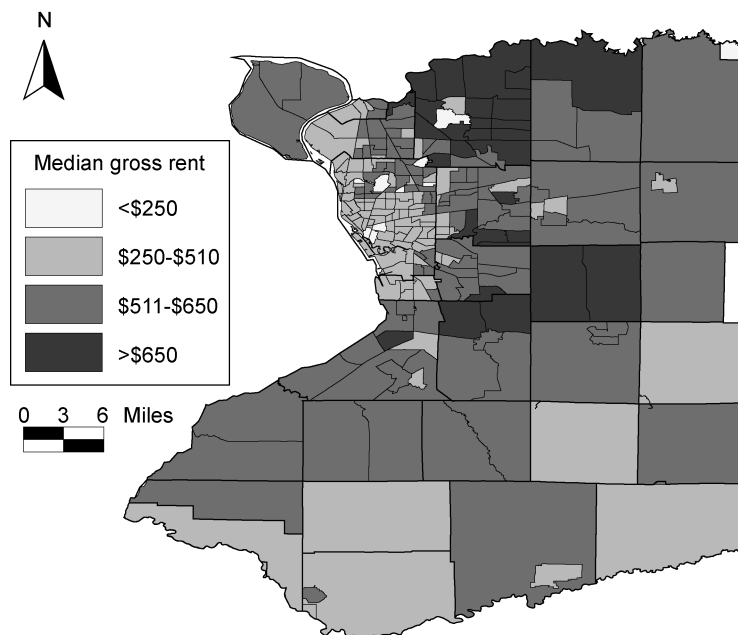


Fig. 4. Accessibility of Section 8 vouchers in the Buffalo metropolitan area.

relations of gender, race, and poverty. In the next section, I explore the different logics employed by these heads of household in choosing new housing locations.

GEOGRAPHIES OF RELOCATION DECISIONS

I chose to move here because I grew up in this area and I know it's safe, so I was familiar with it. And the second reason I chose to move here is that it's convenient to where I work and where my mother lives. That way, it's convenient for my daughter to go over to my mom's house when I have to work. Then the third reason being that this neighborhood is very accessible to public transportation.⁸

It's really hostile where I work. I work in Amherst [a Buffalo suburb] and I see how White people act at work, so I wouldn't want to be around that everyday. I feel uncomfortable just by their reactions. I don't want to be in that situation, I don't want my kids to experience that ... Listen to the news and there is always something about how someone has gotten hurt because of their color. I mean it's just ridiculous. Racism is there, you can't avoid it. It's going to always be there probably. I don't want my kids around it.⁹

⁸Respondent # 214, personal interview, August 11, 2000.

⁹Respondent # 151, personal interview, August 14, 2000.

TABLE 4. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF COMER VOUCHER RECIPIENTS

Demographic	Number or percentage
Race/ethnicity (%)	
Black non-Hispanic	93.5
Hispanic	4.8
Native-American	0.4
Not identified	1.2
Gender (%)	
Female	81.8
Male	11.7
Not-identified	6.5
Age (years)	
Sample average	33.2
Marital status (%)	
Single/divorced	95.2
Married	2.4
Widowed	2.4
Household structure	
Average number of members	2.8
Households with dependants (%)	82.2
<i>n</i> = 248	

These excerpts from interviews with different Comer voucher recipients illustrate some of the different rationales that motivate relocation decisions. The first quote illustrates the importance of living close to public transportation and to family who help with childcare. The second quote illustrates a grave concern with choosing neighborhoods that are safe. In a city as racially polarized—both socially and geographically—as Buffalo, decisions about safety often become conflated with evaluations of a neighborhood’s racial composition.

To be sure, the ideas expressed in these two quotes are not mutually exclusive. In fact, most of the interview respondents explained that their relocation decisions are based on concerns for accessibility to public transportation, remaining close to their family, and neighborhood safety. These three themes were also widely repeated in the survey responses. As Table 5 shows, a majority of survey respondents identified neighborhood safety, proximity to public transportation, and proximity to family and friends as very influential in deciding where to live. Respondents also noted that the presence of friendly neighbors is important, and I consider this a surrogate for further approximating the importance of security and feelings of safety in a neighborhood environment. Many

TABLE 5. SURVEY RESPONSES TO: “INDICATE HOW IMPORTANT EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ITEMS WERE IN MAKING YOUR DECISION OF WHERE TO MOVE”

Response	Proportion identified as most or very important (%)
Close to family or friends	72
Close to child care	34
Close to bus or train station	72
Close to work	47
Close to social services	13
Close to personal activities (like church or shopping)	64
Safe neighborhood	97
Access to quality schools	75
Friendly neighbors	85
Housing quality	93
Racial composition	64
<i>n</i> = 61	

survey respondents also identified housing quality (i.e., the condition of the inside of the housing unit) as very important to their relocation decisions. I interpret this as consistent with a concern for choosing a living space that is safe and secure in a material sense.

Following Gilbert’s (1998) work, I argue that the Comer voucher households have concentrated in the central city of the metropolitan area because it is a location where they can draw on their support structures in order to negotiate material and discursive constraints in the day-to-day struggle of household reproduction. These households predominantly relocated to central city neighborhoods for two additional reasons—access to public transportation and concerns about neighborhood safety, both of which are highly geographic. In the remainder of this section, I develop the argument that these three themes are integral to heads’ of household survival strategies and that these strategies help understand why low-income African American households concentrate in the central city.

Race and Neighborhood Safety in Buffalo

The connection between perceptions of racial composition of a neighborhood and its safety in Buffalo is complex. As Table 5 shows, 64% of survey respondents indicated that the racial composition of a neighborhood influences their decision about where to move. Yet, as demonstrated in Table 6, respondents overwhelmingly preferred mixed-race neighborhoods. These figures do not support the argument that segregation results from voluntary moves compelled by own-race preferences. Moreover, as the second quote at the beginning of this section suggests, decisions by Blacks to avoid White-dominated

**TABLE 6. SURVEY RESPONSES TO:
“WHAT TYPE OF NEIGHBORHOOD DO YOU MOST PREFER TO LIVE IN?”**

Neighborhood type	Responses (%)
Where my race is the majority	7
Where races are equally mixed	85
Where my race is the minority	5
No answer	3
<i>n</i> = 61	

neighborhoods are a reaction against racism, or at least that living in such areas would result in encounters with racism and lead to feelings of insecurity. For many Blacks, mixed-race neighborhoods may be seen as more safe from racial tension. Consistent with the argument of Boswell et al. (1998) about segregation in Miami, Blacks in Buffalo may avoid primarily White neighborhoods because of concerns for how Blacks would be treated in such areas. The persistence of segregation in this case is not a result of race preference from the perspective of African Americans.

In some cases, safety may be neatly mapped onto the terrain of racial politics in a place. Yet, the issue of avoiding particular areas for concerns about safety is not starkly divided along Black-White lines in this case. One African American woman I interviewed explained her desire to leave the East side of Buffalo (which is a center of the African American population in the city) for a mixed-race neighborhood in the city's North end:

I was staying on the East side for a while from 1988 to 1998. I had moved out because it was getting rowdy: men at the corner stores standing around and flirting [with passers-by]. It was violent around there and I didn't like that. My apartment there was nice but the section was terrible ... I moved here because I need to live by the bus stops, the stores and the laundromats so I don't have to walk too far. Everything is close to me, it's a 15 or 20 minutes walk and that's it ... I'm trying to stay around here and ... I like this neighborhood because it's close to my daughter, she has four boys [who I often look after].¹⁰

This respondent's comments highlight that concerns about neighborhood safety can lead to a decision to leave a neighborhood dominated by one's own race. This respondent, like many others, left a primarily Black neighborhood for concerns of safety. This respondent's comments, as well as others' in the sample, suggest that safety and security cannot be equivocally translated into own-race preferences or ethnocentric attitudes. Moreover, her comments also suggest that safety may be important, but the logistical aspects of

¹⁰Respondent # 3, personal interview, August 18, 2000.

managing everyday life and household reproduction take precedence in the residential calculus of relocation. The following interview excerpt, drawn from an interview with the same respondent quoted above, illustrates this point:

Interviewer: Have you thought about moving out there to Williamsville [A suburb where the respondent works]?

Respondent: No, I'd be missing my family. There ain't a lot of stores around there, I've seen that. You've got to wait a long time to get a bus, and there isn't anywhere to sit down for the bus. Everybody has cars out there. I'll stay in the city.

Interviewer: Would you want to live in a neighborhood that was made-up of entirely a different race? Would you be comfortable with that?

Respondent: A different race? Well first I'd have to move in there and check around the neighborhood. If there was a man hurting somebody, then probably not. But yeah, I would. It's mostly White around here and I don't worry about that. I worry about getting to work and back.

Demands of Work and Home in the Survival Strategies of Poor African Americans

Given the relatively high representation of single-mother households in the study population, the balance of work and family emerges as an extremely important aspect of deciding where to live. The survey responses in Table 5 show just how widespread this balancing act is. When considering where to relocate, respondents cited the following factors as very important to their relocation decisions: Proximity to a support network of family and friends, to public transportation, to schools, and to personal activities like shopping and church. Perhaps equally important to consider is that 53% of the survey respondents reported that they rely on public transportation to meet the travel requirements of everyday life—commuting, buying groceries, attending church, etc.¹¹ Thus, in order to negotiate the tensions between work demands, family obligations, and children's school and childcare, central city locations are sought out, which in turn reproduces racially divided geographies.

The reasons why central city locations are important to low-income African Americans' survival strategies are threefold: first, the suburban locales in the Buffalo area employ low-density land use plans such that the prospect of using the bus or rail to commute and shop is impractical. For this reason, a number of the interview respondents chose to consider only central city locations. Second, Buffalo's public transportation

¹¹Johnston-Anumonwo's (1997) research on gender, race and commuting times in Buffalo shows that Black women, on average, have the longest commuting times compared to Black men, White men, and White women. This longer commuting time is due, in part, to the high rate of reliance on public transportation among Black women—U.S. Census records show that 34.5% of Black women in Buffalo do not use automobiles in their journey to work. Since African American women in Buffalo generally have long commutes, it is not surprising that only 47% of the Comer voucher recipients indicated a desire to live close to work, whereas 72% indicate a preference for proximity to public transportation. Living close to public transportation is a logical priority when the journey to work is one of many activities required for household reproduction.

system is geographically limited (New York State Advisory Committee, 1999)—most of its routes circulate people within the urban core and few routes extend out into suburban areas. In light of this, the density of bus and rail routes in the urban core affords a greater mobility and access to the sites and activities that are fixtures of everyday life. Third, respondents articulated that they moved close to family and friends, in part, because these networks provide and receive childcare. Relocating close to these networks in most cases meant relocating to central city locations. As shown in Table 5, most respondents did not identify proximity to childcare as influential in their relocation decisions. Instead, the respondents indicated that family members were the providers for childcare. This reliance on family for balancing the demands of work and home brings into focus the earlier discussion of how social networks contribute to the rootedness of Blacks in the central city of Buffalo. The following statement about housing selection illustrates the priorities people assign to being close to their social networks, which enables households to meet the demands of work and household management:

I chose the area because it's closer to my kids' relatives and it's only 15 minutes away from my job. My new place is around the corner from my kids' aunt and on the weekends she watches my kids for me when I have to work, so it was convenient. The kids' school was right next to it.¹²

The survival strategies of the women in this study have a spatial dimension to them, a dimension that helps explain why the segregation of the study population was reproduced. Individuals are embedded in social relations that both enable and constrain their everyday actions and behavior. Often, such social relations have geographical patterns. In Buffalo, where 89% of Blacks in the metro area are clustered within parts of the central city, it is safe to assume that Comer voucher recipients' social networks are also spatially concentrated, and they likely experience high levels of segregation. The persistence of African American segregation in Buffalo can be partly explained by households' decision to move in close proximity to their social networks. In the case of households who seek proximity to their social networks, existing patterns of racial segregation propagate future segregation. In Buffalo and in the study population, the rootedness of African Americans is compounded by a dependence on public transportation and the relatively low degree of reach that public transit has to areas outside of the central city in Buffalo. While this dependence on public transit and family is spatially constraining, there is also an enabling element.

In considering the spatialities of women's survival strategies, Gilbert (1998) develops the argument that women respond to the competing demands of home and work by situating their households in locations where the management of everyday life is made to be empowering—even in light of the constraints of racist oppression, poor transportation connectivity, and poverty. Gilbert (1998, p. 614) argues that:

[M]any women use the spatial boundedness of their everyday lives to develop networks in place, which is an indication of their rootedness. Women's use of place-based

¹²Respondent # 105, personal interview, August 18, 2000.

networks show that rootedness can be both enabling and constraining, often simultaneously, suggesting that it is too simplistic to equate immobility with powerlessness.

I view the widespread decision in the study population to reside in the central city as one to empower their household's quotidian maintenance and reproduction. The social networks that African Americans draw on are primarily located in central city locations. These locations offer an advantage because they enable household reproduction, they allow for greater transportation mobility, and they offer environments where people feel safe (from crime, violence, and racism). Moreover, the decisions to locate in central city areas are made to maintain some degree of independence, self-determination, emotional well-being, and economic security. As both Gilbert (1998) and Hooks (1990) emphasize, the rootedness of Blacks is not only an economic survival strategy, but also a way to adapt to the harsh realities of a racist society.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOUSEHOLDS' SURVIVAL STRATEGIES IN UNDERSTANDING THE PERSISTENCE OF SEGREGATION IN BUFFALO

In the process of relocation, housing and neighborhood choices are voluntary, yet they are not independent choices of autonomous actors. For the households in this study, housing and neighborhood choices were influenced by a number of factors. Most important among them are the place-based social networks on which households draw as part of their survival strategies and as part of managing the everyday processes that define household reproduction. In this study, there is little evidence for the efficacy of own-race preferences in explaining why households chose to relocate in central city locations (i.e., to neighborhoods dominated by their own race). Comer voucher recipients made these choices because it facilitated the daily tasks in managing and providing for their households, not because they felt safer or preferred being surrounded by people of the same race.

The widespread decision in the study population to move to neighborhoods in the City of Buffalo can be seen as a reaction to racism, discrimination, and economic disadvantages in a number of ways. For some households, the choice was motivated by finding a safe environment and neighborhood for the sake of their and their children's safety. I have argued that in some cases, perceptions about safe neighborhoods are tied to the racial composition of the neighborhood. Fear of violence perpetrated by racism and an interest in avoiding the harmful aspects of racial discrimination led some Black heads of household to seek out mixed-race or majority-Black areas. For other households, a safe neighborhood means a place where the female heads of household can feel free from harm.

Central city locations were also chosen because they enabled low-income households' survival strategies. Choosing locations with access to public transportation and in close proximity to social networks assists the reproduction of the household. On average, African Americans in Buffalo earn less than Whites, experience higher rates of poverty, and are about six times more dependent on public transportation than are Whites (Johnston-Anumonwo, 1997). Blacks in Buffalo face material inequalities, face discrimination in jobs and housing (Goldman, 1990; Kraus, 2000) and are often subject to harassment

when they travel into and through suburban areas (Montgomery, 1991; Kraus, 2000; Williams, 2001). Seeking out central city locations can be seen as a strategy to cope with racism, as Hooks (1990) suggests, but it should also be seen as a strategy to empower households in spite of the disadvantages and inequalities they experience.

In the case of Buffalo, the geographical concentration of African Americans in the central city contributes to the persistence of segregation, especially among low-income Blacks who draw on their place-based networks as part of their everyday survival strategies. If Buffalo's social geography were not defined by hypersegregation (Massey and Denton, 1993), the geographies of households' relocation in this study might have led to lower levels of minority segregation and a more geographically dispersed resettlement pattern. Here, the legacy of past segregation and racial discrimination influences people's contemporary housing decisions. My argument that Blacks in Buffalo choose central city locations for the support they lend to households' survival strategies may not have as much relevance for middle and higher income Blacks. Yet, the disproportionately higher rates of low incomes and poverty among Blacks suggest that my argument applies to a large number of households. While the preference model does not assist in explaining the persistence of segregation in Buffalo, it should be remembered that racial inequality, discrimination, racism, and segregation trend toward an extreme in Buffalo. Segregation in other cities may not be as influenced by the legacy of past segregation; it may be that that ethnocentrism and own-race preferences have greater explanatory power in cities in the Southwest, as Clark (2002) suggests.

Clark (2002) is of course correct in stating that racism in America does not resemble the overt form of expression as seen in the Jim Crow era, but racism has not disappeared nor has its efficacy (Jonas, 1998; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Delaney, 2002; Wilson, 2002). Theories that seek understanding on the persistence of segregation need to incorporate recent thinking about the efficacy of race and racism and on the expression of discrimination. Ruddick (1996) has written about the interlocking nature of race, class, and gender and suggests that expression of exclusion and discrimination often take subtle, nuanced, and complex forms. I have endeavored to show, through analysis of the *Comer vs. Cisneros* case in Buffalo, that the reasons why low-income African American (mostly female-headed) households choose to relocate to central city locations are related to perceptions of safety, social support, and transportation access that these locations provide. Moreover, central city locations offer succor to households who struggle with the disadvantages they experience through relations of race, class, and gender.

The analysis of this case also illustrates that the three categories used to explain racial segregation—race, class, and own-race preference—are in reality interdependent and mutually constitutive. One way to observe the interaction of these categories is to adopt analytical perspectives that are sensitive to context and the embeddedness of households. A context-sensitive perspective is one that incorporates the complexity of the situations in which households make decisions about where to move and are thus useful in perceiving the influence of structural and discursive relationships on individuals' decisions. Context-sensitive perspectives are needed in studies of racial segregation in order to focus on the social and relational factors in which housing and neighborhood choices are embedded.

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