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**Report No. 1**

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**NEW YORK CITY'S**

# **RACIAL DISTRIBUTION**

**by HAROLD GOLDBLATT**



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**Research Report No. 1**

**Trends in the Racial Distribution of the  
Population of the City of New York Between  
1950 and 1957: An Ecological Analysis**



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TRENDS IN THE RACIAL DISTRIBUTION OF THE  
POPULATION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
BETWEEN 1950 AND 1957:  
AN ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

**Harold Goldblatt**

This survey of trends in the racial distribution of the population of the City of New York was made possible because both the decennial census of 1950 and the special census of 1957 reported the racial composition of census tracts. The Planning Commission of the City of New York computed the racial proportions of the population in each census tract for 1950 and also for 1957. What follows is an ecological trend analysis in which the census tract is the tabulation unit. The organization of the report is as follows: first, a description of the situation as of 1950 for the city as a whole and for each of the five boroughs separately; second, an analysis of the extent of change, again for the city as a whole and for each borough separately; and, finally, a description of how matters stood in 1957.

I

Approximately half the census tracts in New York City were exclusively white in 1950 (Table I). Manhattan had the smallest percentage of all-white census tracts (7.69%) and Queens had the largest (60.48%). The other boroughs ranked between them, in this order: Richmond, 39.47%; The Bronx, 43.85%; Brooklyn, 51.42%. (See Appendix Table I.) Therefore it can be stated that in 1950 fewer than half of all the census tracts in the city as a whole were all white. This was true also in three of the five boroughs.

TABLE I

Proportion of Nonwhite Population in  
New York City Census Tracts, 1950

Proportion of Nonwhites in Census Tracts	Proportion of Census Tracts
None	47.02%
Less than 1%	26.82
1 - 9.9	15.66
10 - 24.9	3.65
25 - 49.9	2.43
50 - 74.9	1.66
75% or more	2.76
Total Tracts = 100%	(2,465)

Caution is required in interpreting these figures in a segregation-desegregation context. In the first place, the segregation-desegregation pattern is a continuum at any given time, and where to draw the line between the two parts is a matter of arbitrary choice. In the second place, the proportion of nonwhites residing in mainly white areas under conditions of socio-economic inequality with the white residents—that is, Negroes holding jobs, such as those of building superintendent or domestic servant—is unknown. It will be noted (Table I) that the racial distribution of the total population of the city in 1950 was skewed strongly to the left with decreasing proportions of census tracts in each succeeding category except the last one. The modally typical distribution for the city as a whole (see Table I) was the all-white census tract, for 47.02% of all the census tracts were in this category. The distribution for Brooklyn, largest of the five boroughs, most closely resembled the distribution pattern for the city as a whole. (See Appendix Table 1.) Manhattan departed from the pattern in being the only borough where the single largest proportion of census tracts (41.96%) had nonwhite residents but only in the proportion of less than 1% of the population—and the census tract having a nonwhite population of less than 1% was the modally typical census tract for this borough. Manhattan also was the only borough that had a substantial (12.24%) proportion of census tracts having 75% or more nonwhite residents. Richmond, too, departed markedly from the city pattern in having an unusually large

proportion of tracts with a 1-9.9% representation of nonwhites and no tracts with 50% or more of the population nonwhite. The Richmond distribution was thus bi-modal.

The slope of these distributions describes crudely the extent to which racial segregation was the custom in the City of New York in 1950. A bell-shaped or normal curve would be more characteristic of desegregation. It is quite clear that of all the boroughs Manhattan alone approaches this type of curve. A final set of figures on this point: For the city as a whole, 89.50% of the census tracts had nonwhite populations in 1950 that were smaller than 10% of the total populations of the census tracts. The comparable statistics for each of the boroughs were as follows: Manhattan, 75.17%; The Bronx, 91.50%; Brooklyn, 90.46%; Queens, 91.93%; Richmond, 94.74%.

## II

Between the decennial census of 1950 and the special census of 1957 the racial composition of almost 65% of the census tracts in the City of New York underwent a change. The change was more often an increase (45.84%) in the proportion of nonwhites than a decrease (18.54%), the ratio being more than two census tracts to one. (See Table II-1.)

Whether an increase or a decrease, these changes were most frequently of small proportion. Thus, of the census tracts that showed an increase in nonwhite population, more than 4 out of 10 showed an increase of less than 1%; the same is true of 7 out of 10 census tracts that showed a decrease in nonwhite population. As may be seen from Appendix Table 2, Brooklyn, partly because it is the largest borough, most resembled the pattern for the city as a whole, while Manhattan was first both in the number of tracts that showed an increase and in the number that showed a decrease in the proportion of nonwhite residents.

TABLE II-1

Change in Racial Proportions of Population of  
Census Tracts in New York City, 1950-1957

Extent of Change	Proportion of Census Tracts
<b>None</b>	<b>35.62%</b>
<b>Increase</b>	<b>45.84</b>
Less than 1%	19.55
1 - 9.9	17.40
10 - 24.9	5.03
25 - 49.9	2.72
50 - 74.9	0.98
75% or more	0.16
<b>Decrease</b>	<b>18.54</b>
Less than 1%	13.67
1 - 9.9	4.10
10 - 24.9	0.57
25 - 49.9	0.20
50% or more	0.00
<b>Total = 100%</b>	<b>(2,465)</b>

Where did the change occur? The data describe roughly the extent to which racial segregation remained customary between 1950 and 1957—and the extent to which it did not. As Table II-2 indicates, the extent to which the population of nonwhites increased in a census tract between 1950 and 1957 depended markedly on the proportion of nonwhites already resident in the area.

TABLE II-2

Proportionate Increases in Nonwhite Population, 1950-1957,  
by Proportion of Nonwhite Population in 1950

Proportionate Increase in Nonwhite Population of Census Tracts, 1950-1957	Proportion of Nonwhite Population of Census Tracts in New York City in 1950			
	None	Less than 1%	1-9.9%	10% or more
None	70.58%	12.57%	1.90%	3.08%
Less than 1%	19.84	48.20	14.76	12.82
1 - 9.9%	5.70	32.31	60.99	38.97
10% or more	3.88	6.92	22.35	45.13
Total census tracts in which proportion of nonwhites increased	(1,159)	(390)	(264)	(195)

Thus a comparison of the areas classified according to proportion of nonwhites in 1950 shows that the proportion of census tracts in which the nonwhite population increased 10% or more from 1950 to 1957 rose steadily from 3.88% (among the all-white tracts) to 45.13% (among the tracts with a nonwhite population of 10% or more).

Yet another piece of information on the source of the changes in racial distribution of population between 1950 and 1957 may be found in Table II-3, which compares proportionate increases and decreases by nonwhite concentrations in 1950. This table shows clearly the tendency for the increases in nonwhite population from 1950 to 1957 to occur more often in proportion to the nonwhites already in the area. The table shows also a clear tendency for the decreases between 1950 and 1957 to occur more often in the census tracts "less than 1%" nonwhite than in the census tracts "1-9.9%" nonwhite and more often in the latter category than in the tracts "10% or more" nonwhite. Also of interest is the fact that the proportion of census tracts that changed varies negatively with the racial composition of the tracts in 1950. Of those census tracts exclusively nonwhite in 1950, 71% did not change; of those less than 1% nonwhite, 7.4% did not change; of those 1-9.9% nonwhite, 1.3% did not change. Thereafter the figure rises to 2.3% for the 10%-or-more group.

TABLE II-3

Proportionate Change in Nonwhite Population  
of New York City Census Tracts, 1950-1957, by  
Proportion of Nonwhite Population in 1950

	Proportion of Nonwhite Population in 1950			
	None	Less than 1%	1-9.9%	10% or more
No Change	70.6%	7.4%	1.3%	2.3%
Increase	29.4	51.6	67.1	73.0
Decrease	0.0	41.0	31.6	24.7
Total Census Tracts = 100%	(1,159)	(661)	(386)	(259)

Table II-3 describes the average relationship between the initial racial composition of census tracts in 1950 and the rate and type of subsequent change. The breakdowns for the five boroughs are given in Appendix Table 3. Trends in Brooklyn and Richmond follow those of the city pattern fairly closely. Manhattan is particularly notable for the smaller-than-average proportion of census tracts in the "10% or more" group that decreased in proportion of nonwhites. The Bronx is not notably above average in this respect, but the downward trend in the relationship between the nonwhite concentration in 1950 and decreases thereafter is not consistent (uninterrupted) here. Queens is notable for the above-average increase in the "10% or more" nonwhite group.

A close-up look at some of the exceptions to the general pattern would be instructive but will not be attempted at this time. There is, for example, a relatively small number of tracts in each borough (except in Richmond, where the number is larger) that registered neither an increase nor a decrease in racial proportions. What makes these areas different from the others? Likewise, consider the areas that were all white in 1950 but that gained nonwhites by 1957: Were these all fringe areas? And if not, how do they differ from the others?

### III

How stood matters in 1957? For the city as a whole, the distribution of census tracts with varying proportions of nonwhites is presented in Table III-1.

TABLE III-1

Proportion of Nonwhite Population  
in New York City Census Tracts, 1957

Proportion of Nonwhites in Census Tracts	Proportion of Census Tracts
None	40.89%
Less than 1%	23.65
1 - 9.9	19.07
10 - 24.9	5.76
25 - 49.9	4.06
50 - 74.9	2.47
75% or more	4.10
Total Tracts = 100%	(2,465)

As in 1950, the all-white census tract was modally typical of the city as a whole. But the proportion of such tracts decreased from 47.02% (Table I) to 40.89% (Table III-1). In this seven-year period the proportion of census tracts with fewer than 1% nonwhites also diminished—from 26.82% to 23.65%. The proportion of census tracts in all other categories increased.

Readers of these data may feel that the diminution in the proportion of all-white tracts represents a gain for integration; on the other hand, they may feel that the increase in the proportion of tracts 50% or more nonwhite does not represent a gain.

The interpretation is not a simple one, for while there has indeed occurred a wider distribution of nonwhites for the city as a whole (and dispersal is an accepted measure of integration) apparently the areas of nonwhite concentration also have expanded (and concentration is, of course, the usual indicator of residential segregation). Appendix Table 4 presents the proportion of Negro (nonwhite) population in census tracts for each borough as of 1957. Of all the boroughs, not Richmond but Queens had the largest proportion of all-white census tracts, as in 1950; Manhattan had the fewest, again as in 1950.

But Manhattan is also the only borough in which the proportion of all-white census tracts increased—from 7.69% to 10.80%, or, in absolute terms, from 22 to 31. (Compare Appendix Tables 1 and 4.) This is, of course, a net increase. Actually, a total of 16 Manhattan census tracts changed to all-white in the seven-year period. In Table III-2 comparable figures are given for all the boroughs in 1957 and, in parallel columns, the proportion of nonwhites in the census-tract population seven years earlier (1950).

TABLE III-2

Census Tracts in Which the Racial Distribution of the Population Changed to All White Between 1950 and 1957

Borough	Total Number of Tracts That Became All White Between 1950 and 1957	No. of Newly All-white Tracts (1957) Proportion of Nonwhites in 1950		
		Under 1%	1 - 9.9%	10% or More
Bronx	47	39	4	4
Brooklyn	66	50	12	4
Manhattan	16	10	5	1
Queens	50	38	8	4
Richmond	7	6	1	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>13</b>

The major point of this table is that residential integration once attained is not necessarily attained forever. While 3 out of 4 (76.88%) of the census tracts that became all white in 1957 had been almost all white in 1950—and a strong question may be raised whether tracts under 1% in nonwhite populations should not be classed as segregated because of the way the statistics behave—there were 43 tracts in which the loss of nonwhite population appears to have been substantial. The tracts that became all white (186) are no more than a fourth of the number of all-white tracts that gained nonwhite residents: 7.5% compared with 29.4%. However, they serve to remind us that the changing neighborhood or changing community changes away from nonwhite occupancy as well as toward it. Thus the processes of urban change are not all in the direction of increasing dispersion of nonwhites.

As to the shapes of the racial distributions of the population in 1957 in each borough, no two boroughs were quite alike. Brooklyn, the largest borough (Appendix Table 4-b), most closely resembled the average distribution for New York City as a whole (Table III-1); that is, skewed to the left with smaller proportions of census tracts per category as the nonwhite population increases except for the last category. Again, as in 1950, Manhattan most nearly resembled a normal curve, while Richmond and, to a lesser extent, the Bronx were bi-modal, and Queens tended toward a "U" shape. (See Appendix Table 4.)

**Summary:**—The following points stand out as salient in this ecological description of racial trends in New York City between 1950 and 1957:

1. Between these two years the racial composition of 65% of the census tracts changed. This change was toward an increase in the proportion of nonwhites twice as often as toward a decrease.
2. The extent of the change in any given area depends strongly on the initial racial composition of the area.
3. The larger the proportion of nonwhites in an area in 1950, the greater the proportionate increase of nonwhites between 1950 and 1957. One hundred eighty-six census tracts (or 7.5% of the total) that had some nonwhites in 1950 had none in 1957.

APPENDIX

Table 1

Proportion of Nonwhite Population in Census  
Tracts in Each Borough, in 1950

Proportion of Nonwhite Population	Table 1-a Bronx	Table 1-b Brooklyn	Table 1-c Manhattan
	Census Tracts	Census Tracts	Census Tracts
None	43.85%	51.42%	7.69%
Less than 1%	31.10	25.00	41.96
1 - 9.9	16.55	14.04	25.52
10 - 24.9	3.36	33.62	6.64
25 - 49.9	3.13	2.19	3.15
50 - 74.9	1.12	1.54	2.80
75% or more	0.89	2.19	12.24
Total Tracts = 100%	(447)	(912)	(286)

  

Proportion of Nonwhite Population	Table 1-d Queens	Table 1-e Richmond
	Census Tracts	Census Tracts
None	60.48%	39.47%
Less than 1%	21.53	19.30
1 - 9.9	9.92	35.97
10 - 24.9	2.69	3.51
25 - 49.9	2.13	1.75
50 - 74.9	1.98	0.00
75% or more	1.27	0.00
Total Tracts = 100%	(706)	(114)

Table 2

Change in Racial Proportions of Population  
of Census Tracts by Borough, 1950-1957

Extent of Change in Nonwhite Proportion	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens	Richmond
<b>None</b>	<b>33.11%</b>	<b>38.71%</b>	<b>10.14%</b>	<b>49.90%</b>	<b>27.19%</b>
<b>Increase</b>	<b>49.89</b>	<b>44.19</b>	<b>65.38</b>	<b>36.83</b>	<b>50.00</b>
Less than 1%	17.23	19.52	25.17	17.99	24.56
1 - 9.9	25.28	15.46	34.62	7.08	22.81
10 - 24.9	5.15	5.59	4.89	4.67	2.63
25 - 49.9	2.01	3.40	0.35	3.68	0.00
50 - 74.9	0.22	0.22	0.00	2.98	0.00
75% or more	0.00	0.00	0.35	0.43	0.00
<b>Decrease</b>	<b>17.00</b>	<b>17.10</b>	<b>24.48</b>	<b>18.27</b>	<b>22.81</b>
Less than 1%	12.53	13.05	13.99	15.01	14.04
1 - 9.9	2.91	3.40	9.79	2.69	8.77
10 - 24.9	0.89	0.65	0.35	0.43	0.00
25 - 49.9	0.67	0.00	0.35	0.14	0.00
50 - 74.9	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
75% or more	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Table 3

Proportionate Change in Nonwhite Borough Population,  
1950-1957, by Proportion of Nonwhite Population in 1950

	Proportion of Nonwhite Population in 1950:			
	None	Less than 1%	1 - 9.9%	10% or more
<b>The Bronx</b>				
No Change	71.9%	3.6%	1.3%	2.7%
Increase	28.1	60.4	83.8	68.4
Decrease	0.0	36.0	14.9	28.9
Total Tracts = 100%	(196)	(139)	(74)	(38)
<b>Brooklyn</b>				
No Change	69.9	10.9	0.0	0.0
Increase	30.1	47.4	62.5	85.1
Decrease	0.0	41.7	37.5	14.9
Total Tracts = 100%	(469)	(228)	(123)	(87)
<b>Manhattan</b>				
No Change	63.6	5.0	5.5	7.1
Increase	36.4	71.1	74.0	54.9
Decrease	0.0	23.3	20.5	38.0
Total Tracts = 100%	(22)	(120)	(73)	(71)
<b>Queens</b>				
No Change	71.2	8.6	0.0	0.0
Increase	28.8	57.2	50.0	87.7
Decrease	0.0	34.2	50.0	12.3
Total Tracts = 100%	(427)	(152)	(70)	(57)
<b>Richmond</b>				
No Change	68.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Increase	31.1	50.0	68.3	66.7
Decrease	0.0	50.0	31.7	33.3
Total Tracts = 100%	(45)	(22)	(41)	(6)

Table 4

Proportion of Nonwhite Population in Census  
Tracts in Each Borough, in 1957

Proportion of Nonwhite Population	Table 4-a Bronx	Table 4-b Brooklyn	Table 4-c Manhattan
	Census Tracts	Census Tracts	Census Tracts
None	42.72%	43.20%	10.80%
Less than 1%	17.23	25.55	23.35
1 - 9.9	25.73	16.34	35.89
10 - 24.9	6.71	5.26	10.10
25 - 49.9	4.70	4.39	4.18
50 - 74.9	2.24	2.08	2.09
75% or more	0.67	3.18	13.59
Total Tracts = 100%	(447)	(912)	(286)

	Table 4-d Queens	Table 4-e Richmond
	Census Tracts	Census Tracts
None	50.00%	35.96%
Less than 1%	26.63	14.04
1 - 9.9	8.50	38.60
10 - 24.9	3.40	9.65
25 - 49.9	3.54	1.75
50 - 74.9	3.68	0.00
75% or more	4.25	0.00
Total Tracts = 100%	(706)	(114)

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