From Immigration Assimilation to Metropolitan Regeneration and Transformation: Notes and Reflections on the Processes of Immigrant Settlement and Metropolitan Change in Chicago Today

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Introduction

Over the course of the past four decades, millions of new immigrants have entered the United States. As of the year, 2002, more than 32 million new residents, or approximately 11 per cent of the total population, had been added in this manner to the population of the United States (U.S. Census, February 2003). This stream of new immigrants has come to America from places very different from those in the past. As the result of a major overhaul of immigration policy evident in the 1965 Hart-Celler Immigration Act, the long-time preference for settlement given to immigrants from Western Europe was dropped; in its place new criteria were enacted that would shift the basic flow of immigrants from Western Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America.

The large majority of these newcomers today, or about 50 per cent, arrive from countries in Latin America (U.S. Census, February 2003). By far the largest number comes from Mexico. As of the year 2000, 9.2 million immigrants, or roughly 30 per cent of the total foreign-born residents of the United States had entered from Mexico (U.S. Census, December 2003). As one might expect, these immigrants bring with them many things – not the least of which is often a rich culture and a different language, both of which are beginning to alter the character of the United States.

The changes to America are concentrated both regionally and in major metropolitan areas. The foreign-born tend to be most heavily concentrated in the West and Northeast, and least heavily in the Midwest (U.S. Census, December 2003). For example, fully 26 per cent of the population of the state of California comes today from foreign countries. Moreover, as of the year, 2000, four counties held 22 per cent of the total U.S. foreign-born population (U.S. Census, December 2003). They were: Los Angeles County; Miami-Dade County; Cook County, Illinois; and Queens County, New York.

Issues and Questions

What are the implications of this large influx of new residents? For those people who are interested in the character and shape of metropolitan areas, there have been remarkable changes. Entire new areas of the metropolis have been taken over by immigrants, changing the landscape in dramatic fashion. Moreover, instead of just entering the city at its interior, as was characteristic of the earlier waves of immigrants to the United States, many new immigrants now enter the suburbs and other fringe areas of the metropolis (Alba, Logan and Stults, 2000). The effect has been to create an entirely new demographic and social face to the city, one that is very likely to influence it well into the future.

Perhaps the most intriguing question about these matters concerns what the future is likely to bring for the new immigrants, especially in terms of their incorporation into American society. Traditional theory in sociology has spoken in terms of the assimilation of new immigrants into America. The older waves of immigrants, according to this view, gradually

became absorbed into the United States: the differences between the foreign-born resident and the native gradually dissolved so that it seemed that the newcomers simply became like the natives. Theories were developed to more carefully articulate this point of view, especially in the writings of the sociologist, Milton Gordon (1964), who spoke of different forms of assimilation and incorporation. Although such theory fell into disrepute for a time, in recent years sociologists have resurrected it in one form or another; and today it seems to be the guiding view of major students of immigration (Alba and Nee, 2003).

A second view today that is especially popular speaks in terms of the transnational character of immigration. Adapted to the new realities of the world, those who speak of immigration and transnationalism seek to explore the ways that new immigrants retain their ties to their homelands (Glick Schiller, 1999). In this view, new immigrants are almost like temporary, rather than permanent, residents of the United States. Their transnational character, it is emphasized, takes place because of the ease with which people can move back and forth across national boundaries today. That, plus the ease of communication, via the Internet or the telephone, it is argued, makes today's body of immigrants experience a much different kind of America, and fate, in general, than yesterday's newcomers.

While both views are very important, and certainly share a measure of truth between them, they fail to help us understand the depths of change to the metropolis, itself, a settlement and change that is so visible to many residents. Assimilation would make it appear that the immigrants are simply dissolving into the folds of the metropolis; but simple inspection of the various immigrant/ethnic clusters of the metropolis make that observation anything but transparently true. Transnationalism, as a perspective, is extremely useful for understanding how people move back and forth between countries, as well as the social contacts created among them; but it says nothing about the ways in which the immigrants may both settle into and reshape the metropolis of the host society.

The Themes of This Paper

In this brief paper I propose here to talk about the new immigrants in very different terms than current theories do. In particular, I want to argue – and then to demonstrate with some preliminary evidence – that the new immigrants are helping to remake the character of the American metropolis. And they are doing so, I believe, in ways that will transform the metropolis in the near, if not even the distant, future. I will draw on the experience, and my observations, from the city of Chicago. In making this argument, I am deliberately shifting attention away from the ways that immigrants become incorporated into America to the ways in which they appear to be transforming, indeed regenerating, the very character of the American metropolis.

To make my case, I rely on urban theories that speak of the significance of place and space in the metropolis. By place, I mean those sites in the space of the metropolis where people gather and assemble on a regular basis. As I have argued elsewhere (Orum and Chen, 2003), it is at such sites that a number of important things happen that influence human experience. In particular, people affirm their identity at places; they find and develop a sense of community at places; they achieve a sense of a past and a future at places; and they secure, in the end, a sense of being at home. All such qualities, I argue, are essential to the human experience.

In the case of immigrants who make their way into the metropolis today, the new communities and enclaves they develop furnish for them a sense of place. Many such communities are built, in fact, as reminders of places in the homeland. Moreover, these new communities provide the basis both for regular social intercourse as well as furnishing a strong sense of culture and identity for the new immigrants. Thus, in principle, such enclaves are not to be taken lightly; they are not merely points of transit on the way from one site to another; but in many instances, because both of their duration and their importance to immigrants, these enclaves become very central for their well- being. Naturally, there will be empirical variation in the degree of centrality; but it is an assumption of this research that these places are of central importance to the immigrants; and, in so being, they represent an important means for transforming the spaces of the metropolis.

Most importantly, by providing this kind of theoretical angle on the process of settlement by the new immigrants, we at least acknowledge that, in principle, immigrants – or, more precisely, groups of immigrants – can exercise a degree of human agency that is critical both to their own well being and to the further development of the metropolis. In this regard, then, the perspective on place and space that I propose here offers a very different theoretical scenario on the processes of immigrant settlement and change than that provided either by the assimilation or the transnational paradigms. And it does so because I believe that today the metropolis is more open to the influence of new immigrants than it has been in the past.

Who are the Immigrants? And Where Are They Located?

In the past immigrants to America generally located within the heart of the city. Today's immigrants, especially those of the larger groups of foreign-born, can be scattered across the metropolitan area. Although this generalization holds true in Chicago for Asian Indians, Filipinos and Russians, it is particularly true in the case of the foreign-born from Mexico. As Map 1 fully illustrates there are substantial clusters of Mexican-born migrants throughout the metropolitan area of Chicago, from the central city of Chicago to smaller outlying cities, such as Waukegan, Elgin and Aurora.

In addition, as Map 2 points out, in the current generation of immigrants to Chicago one can find the newcomers settling in area previously settled by their forerunners. This is especially true for the Polish-born immigrants in Chicago, who, next to Mexicans, represent the most sizeable number. They are concentrated in two areas of Cook County – a northern and southern one -- both of which were home to previous generations of immigrants from Poland. The importance of this settlement by today's Polish newcomers cannot be underestimated: it suggests that homeland ties and areas remain important to the current generation of foreign-born in America – a suggestion that assimilation may not have been as strong as some theorists have suggested in the past.

Finally, as Map 3 points out, some segments of the foreign-born cluster together more heavily than others. This is particularly true for the Puerto Rican immigrants in Chicago. They have now settled on the northwest side of the city, in the Logan Square/Humboldt Park area; and there they are substantially transforming the character of that part of the metropolis.

Communities of Settlement: Mexican Immigrants in Pilsen and Highwood.

If the maps reveal the different ways that the foreign-born are settling into Chicago – Mexicans across the area, Poles in older Polish areas – what about the nature of the communities they have established? Do the communities qualify as substantial enclaves; or are they, instead, simply locations of convenience? Consider briefly two cases: an older community of Mexican immigrants, and a much newer one.

The older community is called Pilsen. [See Map 1 for Pilsen] Originally the home to Bavarian and Czech immigrants in Chicago, by the mid-1960s the area had begun to change quite substantially. Many of the longtime residents had either died or moved on in other ways; moreover, a small number of new people began to take up residence, recent migrants from Mexico who chose the area because it was close to downtown Chicago as well as being close to industrial jobs. Within a relatively short period of time, Pilsen became the heart of the Mexican community in Chicago. Today more than 45,000 residents live there. Moreover, it has become known as the cultural center of the Midwest for Mexican immigrants: it houses a famous cultural museum as well as a radio station that broadcasts in Spanish [Photo Here]. Over the years, the housing in the community has been upgraded; and today it consists of many homes that, to all outward, appearances are handsome, if not smaller, houses. Though many of their occupants rent, local residents also own a number of homes.

The community has developed a strong social and cultural infrastructure. The Catholic Church has a strong and substantial presence in the community. Services are often carried out both in English and Spanish; and, in some areas, even in Polish to serve some older residents. There are a number of different cultural and social organizations in the community. Women, in particular, have been central to the organization and development of Pilsen, including a famous effort that in 1978 culminated in the construction of a new high school in the area, Benito Juarez.

The community has over the past three decades undergone a substantial turnover in its residents. Many residents come into Pilsen initially, and then move to outlying areas, some of which are in outlying fringe areas of the metropolis, like Aurora and Elgin. Some residents return to Mexico. Indeed, it is said that the community often becomes a ghost town during the period between Christmas and mid-January as many families and their children return home to Mexico for the holidays. The community is not without its problems; and I do not meant to portray it as though it were an entirely settled and problem-free area. In fact, it is not. The area has a high crime rate; and many young people are members of a variety of gangs that lace the area. Murders are not infrequent; and families, but especially mothers, are constantly worried about the welfare of their young people. It is not unusual to see gang members waiting across from schools about mid-afternoon, when children are dismissed, waiting to harass or intimidate children as they walk home to school. In some areas the threat of gangs is so powerful that the school officials do not even permit children to walk the several blocks home from school; instead they provide buses to get the children home.

Pilsen, in brief, has become a substantial presence on the near West side of Chicago. Local residents prize the area; moreover, they constantly worry about the possible intrusion of outside forces, especially developers who today are seeking to gentrify many parts of downtown

Chicago. Twenty miles north of Pilsen lies another community of recent Mexican immigrants, Highwood [See Map 1 for Highwood]. The Highwood enclave is interesting because it was established so recently and so quickly. The details of the ease of its establishment are at this point unclear. But over the past fifteen years, more and more immigrants from Mexico settled in this area, in part to be close to service and landscaping jobs on the North Shore of Chicago. According to the 2000 Census, the Highwood area has a population of almost 4,000 Mexican-born residents, or about 25 per cent of the population.

The ease of settlement is probably due to the very nature of the area. Once an area of an Italian working-class, it became home to many of Chicago's finest restaurants. As these residents began to leave or die out, they left a variety of working-class homes that were affordable to many new immigrants. Today Mexicans live in a number of homes previously occupied by an Italian community. Moreover, they have created a small array of shops and businesses where the daily activities are carried on primarily in Spanish. There is a local grocery store; several restaurants; and other businesses that cater to the Mexican community. Although lacking the history and substance of Pilsen, the ease with which the Highwood enclave was created among Mexican immigrants is noteworthy.

Finally, the presence of this small new enclave has extended its influence over the surrounding area in many ways. Students now attend the high schools and grade schools in the area, schools that are notable for their high quality education. Though once parents were reluctant to become involved in these schools, owing to their timidity, today many parents become actively involved, and thus support the activities of their children. The presence of Spanish-speaking students has compelled the schools to offer bilingual classes. Spanish presence makes its influence felt in other respects as well. Local banks now routinely cater to potential customers in Spanish as well as in English.

Most significantly, all of this has taken place in a very affluent area of metropolitan Chicago, one where the children of the rich and powerful live. That this new community has been created; and that these new immigrants are exercising their influence through various visible and invisible social channels is testimony that immigrants today are exercising their own change over the metropolitan area.

Other Communities of Settlement: Chinatown, Logan Square and Gandhi Marg

If the story of Chicago today were only about the influx of large numbers of immigrants from Mexico, it would be an important story but one that could be told in one key only. But it is not a story just of Mexican immigrants; and it is not a story only of Mexican enclaves. Across the metropolis there are a variety of other communities and enclaves that have been created by immigrants from other lands.

Chinatown, for instance, which lies just south of downtown Chicago, was first established there early in the 20th century. But over the course of the past two decades, it has grown substantially. A number of new immigrants have taken up residence in Chinatown, some from the mainland, but some from Hong Kong and Taiwan as well. They have established new businesses in old Chinatown, and thus led to the expansion of the economic base of this area.

Moreover, Chinatown itself has expanded its boundaries, now edging somewhat closer to the downtown area [Photo Here]. New apartment buildings have sprung up in Chinatown as well as other new buildings. Moreover, a number of new immigrants from China, Taiwan as well as Hong Kong have, like their Mexican counterparts, begun to settle in the primarily white, middle-class areas of the city, like Elmhurst to the west.

Puerto Ricans, as the map here shows [Map 3], are among the most highly concentrated of the new immigrant groups to Chicago, most of them living on the near Northwest side of the city. Like the other groups, they have built new social and cultural foundations for their community. Businesses in Spanish can be found in the area of Logan Square/Humboldt Park, often alongside businesses that are conducted primarily in Polish. Just as in Pilsen, the Puerto Rican community moreover has begun to build important cultural and social institutions that will anchor its residents for years to come.

Finally one of the most interesting areas of recent immigrants is to be found along Devon Avenue on the north side of Chicago. Over the course of the past two decades this area has become occupied by a great mix of immigrants from different lands: numbers of people from India, Korea, and Russia. Today one can walk along Devon Avenue and hear a variety of languages being spoken (Photo Here). The Indian presence is very deep and substantial (Bubinas, 2003). Moreover, while many Indians, because of their backgrounds and skills, have moved out to the suburban areas of the city, many return to Gandhi Marg on the weekends, to do their shopping, pick up groceries, and, as one observer has put it, restore their "cultural roots (Bubinas, 2003; Chand, 2003). Ïn effect, just as in Pilsen and in Logan Square, there is a substantial cultural presence in Gandhi Marg, one that, it seems, not only restores the lives of new immigrants but, in the process, reshapes the character of this part of Chicago.

Broader Indices of Change and Transformation

So Chicago has become changed in the way that new immigrants have settled in the city. Like older immigrant groups, they have clustered together; unlike the older groups they have moved beyond the city limits into suburban areas as well. More than that, some groups are widely dispersed across the metropolitan area, as evident in the case of Mexicans, Poles, and Filipinos..

With the growth of these new groups, there have been corresponding changes in the language and culture evident in the city. Today Chicago houses at least four Spanish language radio stations, as well as Spanish language television stations. It has radio stations in Polish and Russian as well. Moreover, it includes a regular Spanish language daily, Hoy, not to say newspapers from across the world in Polish, Hebrew and

What Does It All Mean?

Over a century ago, the city of Chicago became transformed by the rapid and substantial growth of tens of thousands of immigrants. They came from Europe, from nations like Russia, Ireland and, especially, Poland. Chicago soon came to house the largest number of Polish-born people outside of Warsaw, itself. Jews came to settle in Chicago as well, especially in the area of Maxwell Street, near the famous settlement created by Jane Addams and her associates. Hull House, as it became known, provided a central point of reference and influence for the new

immigrants: it gave classes in how to cook and sew as well as in the higher skills of the English language and the arts. Addams soon became a legend in Chicago, if not across the world, for her efforts both to help and to assist the new immigrants.

Today a similar flood of immigrants has reached Chicago's shores. The question that now is being raised is whether those immigrants will undergo a similar fate as the earlier generations – that is, simply to become absorbed into American society, and thus to become hyphenated Americans who seem to have lost touch with all the remnants of their homelands.

I believe that the circumstances today are sufficiently different to suggest that these many new immigrants and their clusters across the city are likely to suffer a different – indeed better – fate than previous generations. For one thing, they are found everywhere; and everywhere they are found in relatively heavy concentrations. They have created new communities across the metropolitan area. The Spanish speaking groups, because of their sheer numbers and the potential economic influence they wield, have brought a substantial change to the language of culture and business in the city. Moreover, we live in a time when the ease of movement across national boundaries, whether in person or by the Internet, is far greater than in the past. We all know that many immigrants of an earlier time were able to return to their homelands; but many were not, largely for political reasons.

Today, of course, after the terrorist attack on American soil on September 11th, the political landscape has changed substantially. Many immigrants have returned to their homes, as in Mexico; the federal government has deported others, mainly those of Muslim and Arab background. Yet there remain hundreds of thousands of immigrants living and prospering today in Chicago. Moreover, from the few studies we have of these communities, it appears likely they will not disappear anytime soon. Pilsen has been around for four decades; and has only grown in stature as the heart of Mexican community in Chicago. New funds have been found for a cultural center in Paseo Boricua. The clusters of Polish immigrants further suggest that the new Polish immigrants are settled in old Polish areas. Obviously language will make for the ease of their settlement. But if this is happening, it suggests, at least in a preliminary fashion, that the older immigrant/ethnic communities have not disappeared as quickly as had been claimed. And, finally, of course, as in the case of the Muslims living south of Chicago, in Bridgeview, some immigrant communities will become more contested spaces than others. Shortly after September 11th, for example, large crowds gathered nearby the Muslim mosque in Bridgeview; more recently, the local newspapers have begun to target these areas for more hostile and antagonistic coverage, thereby reinforcing the already-present fears of local Muslim residents (Cainkar, 2002).

Those who are interested in issues of planning and planning history for a city like Chicago must take its new immigrants, and their communities, seriously. While power, of course, is wielded over the city by City Hall and the Mayor, in a wide variety of ways from encouraging new development in the near Southside of Chicago to enacting zoning laws across the city, the strength of the new immigrant enclaves, especially in outlying areas free from the jurisdiction of Chicago government, portends the possibility that these communities will exercise far greater power over their own settlements in the future. The evidence is clear, I believe, that they are doing so at present.

Moreover, there is much about the new immigration that remains to be further discovered. It is my impression, at this early point in my research, that these new immigrant enclaves, whether among Mexicans or Polish, exercise a power over their surrounding American environment unlike anything of the past. For one thing, Chicago today is much more open to the variety and diversity of its new ethnics. The city regularly holds parades for almost each and every ethnic group, thereby serving to reinforce the ethnic and immigrant roots of these new residents. Moreover, judging from the extent to which new languages are now used in the metropolis – for example, many banks now do their business in Spanish as well as English; and the State of Illinois provides booklets for new drivers not only in English but also in Spanish and Polish – the influence of the immigrants has moved well beyond the borders of the barrios and of the ghettoes.

In a sense, the city of Chicago lies on the cusp not simply of becoming a world-class, or global city, but, precisely because of the degree to which it has become linked to the larger world, also a multiethnic city. I do not want to overstate the case, but with the wide variety of different groups now living in the metropolis, and with their dispersion across its breadth, the city resembles nothing so much as a smorgasbord of new ethnic groups. If this is so, and if this influence extends deep into the culture and eventually the politics of the city, it could exercise a deep refashioning of the larger community. Multiculturalism, then, would no longer be simply an ideal but closer to the reality of the city itself.

No one can predict what the future will bring, especially in terms of politics and terrorism. I am sure that a century ago, in a similar period of heavy immigration to Chicago, similar pronouncements were being made about the possible impact of the new residents on the city. Yet, unlike those times, when even the welfare agencies, like Hull House under the tutelage of Jane Addams sought to provide relief by furnishing instruction in all the American ways, there seems to be a greater opportunity for immigrants to exercise their influence, rather than simply being the objects of the influence by the host institutions.

If all of this is so, if we assume that multiculturalism will work its way deeply into the fabric of the city, then the planners have a rare opportunity not only to fashion large municipal projects but to have a hand in enhancing the multicultural presence. In particular, it would seem to me that they could lend an effective hand to the residents of many of these communities of which I have spoken, assisting them in fashioning more effective and livable conditions.

Planners, I believe, should work to help some of these communities sustain and develop their residential areas. In this obviously political situation, planners can either be on the side of local authorities, and figure out ways to contain, if not eliminate, some of the new settlements; or they can work in concert with local immigrants, in Pilsen, Chinatown, the Polish areas, and other immigrant enclaves across the metropolis to help make those communities more sustainable and more attractive to their residents.

Just as we are in time of transition and change in the city of Chicago, so local planners face an issue of whose side they will be on: that of local authorities or that of immigrants. It is a momentous and important time; and one in which planners can further assist the flourishing and

development of the rich diversity of culture and society evident in the new immigrant communities of Chicago.

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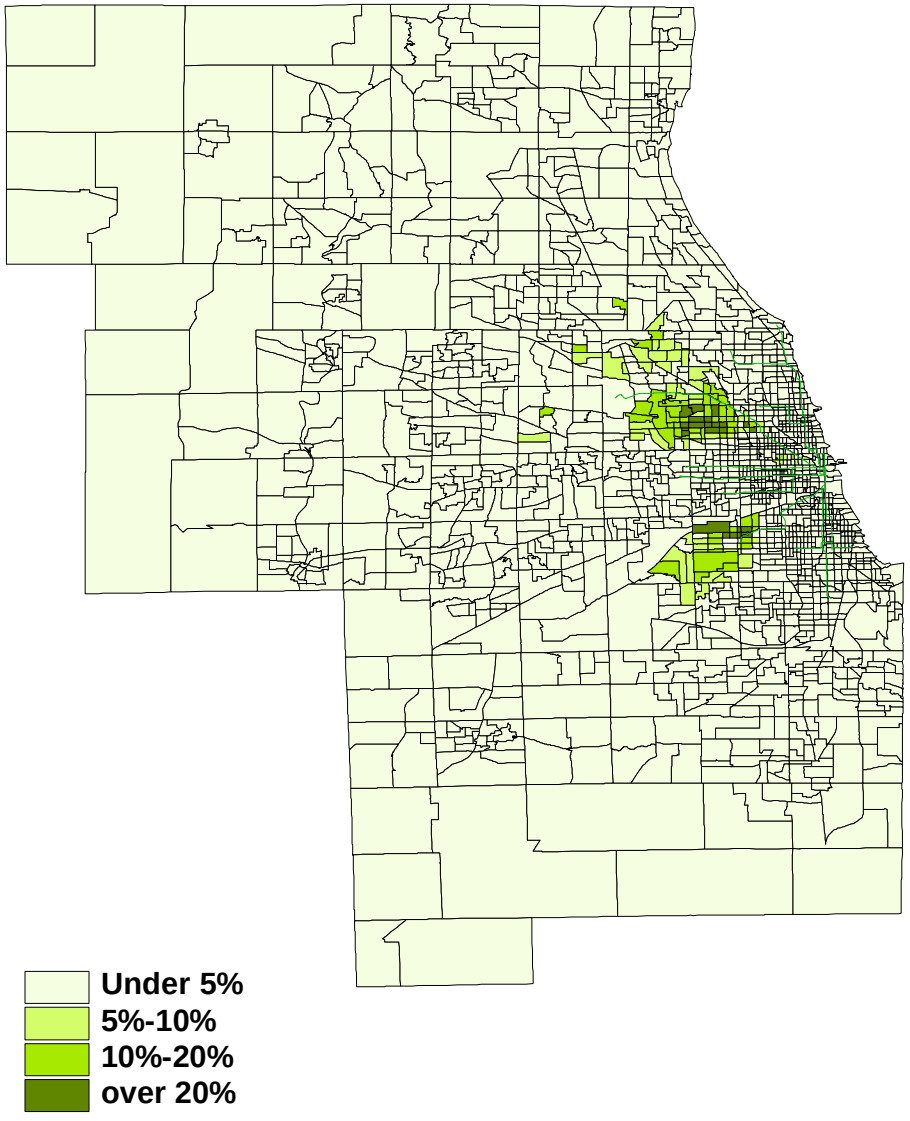
Percentage of Polish-born Persons
by Census Tract for Chicago Metropolitan
Area (Including six counties*), 2000



Percentage of Polish Ancestry
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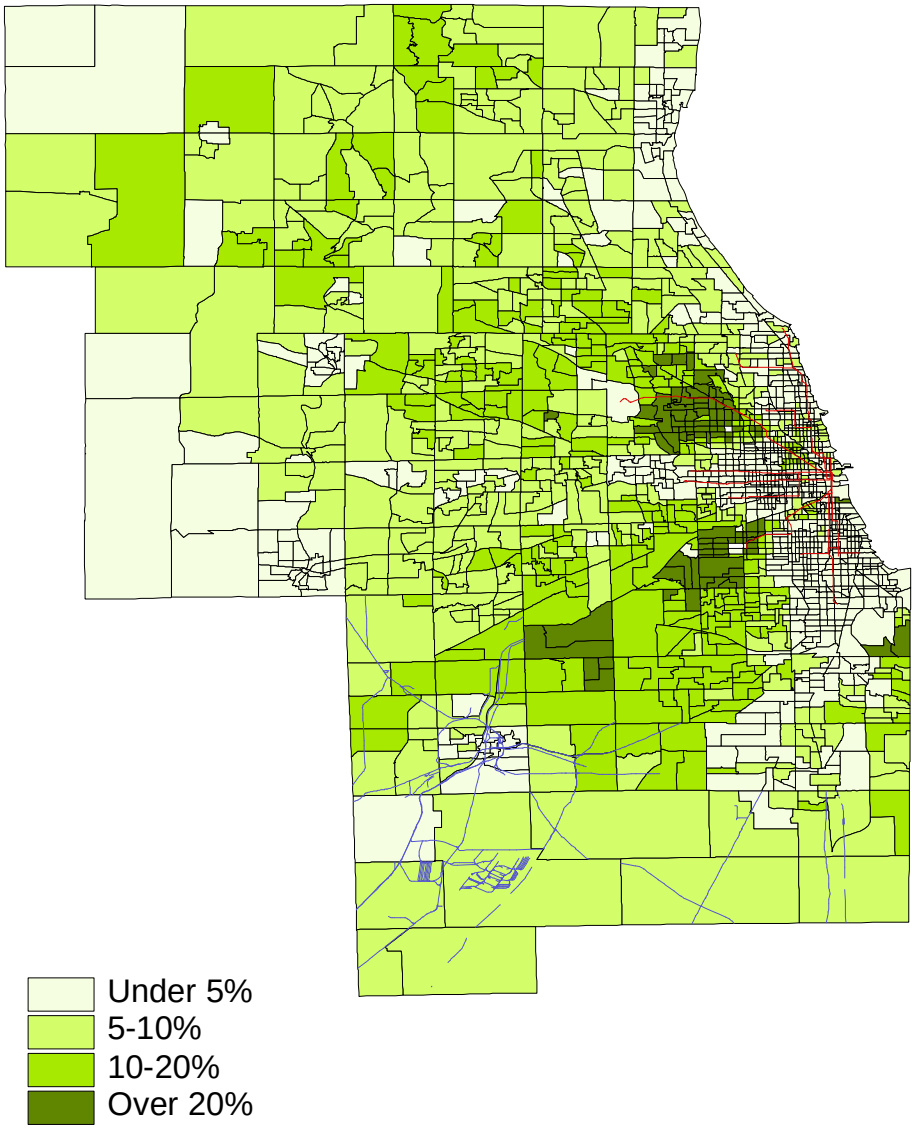
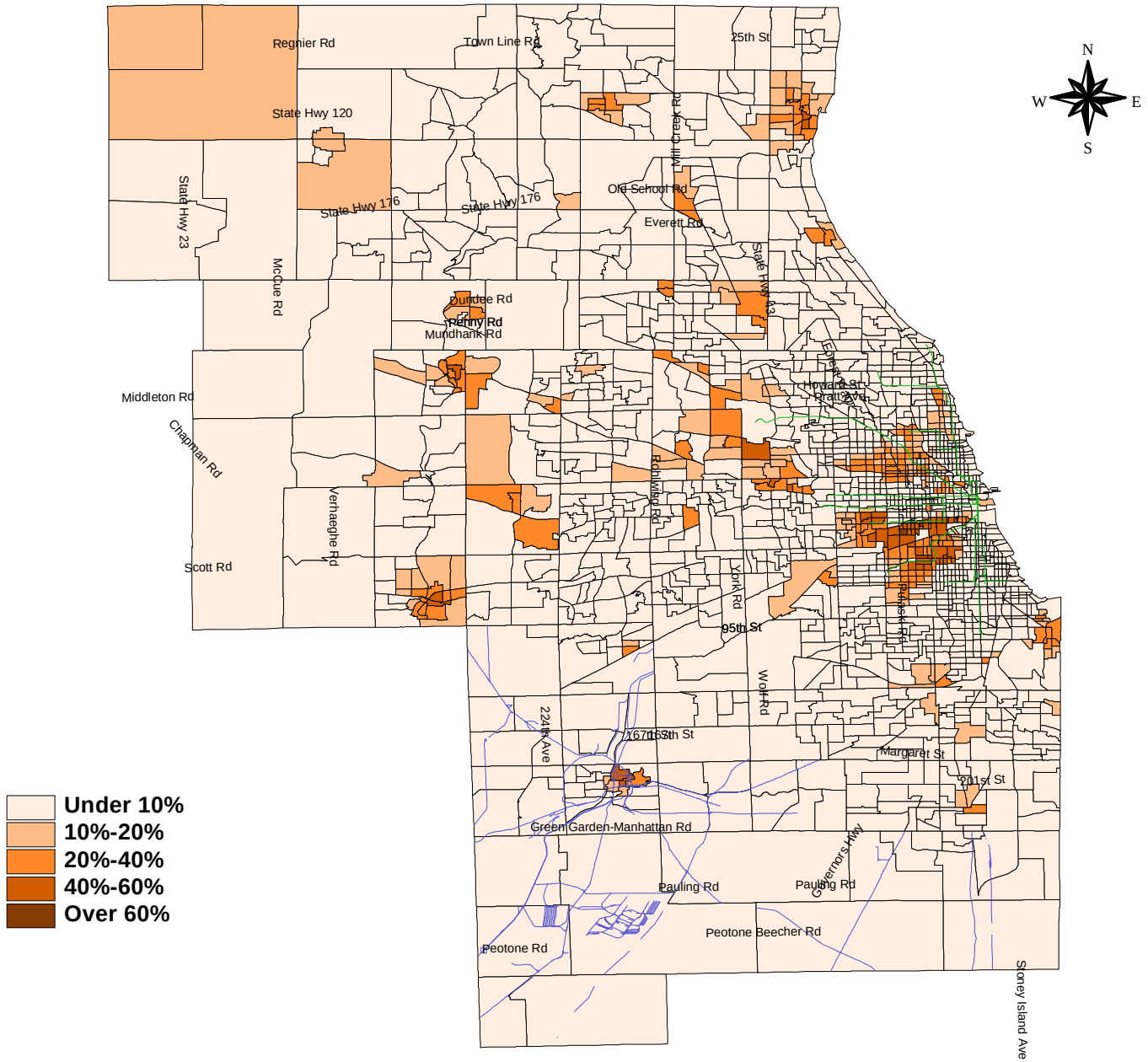


Percentage of Mexico-born Persons by Census Tract for Chicago Metropolitan Area (Including Six Counties*), 2000



Percentage of Puerto Rican-born Persons by Census Tract for Chicago Metropolitan Area (Including Six Counties*), 2000