

Race, ethnicity, and outdoor recreation in the United States: Tests of the marginality, ethnicity, and discrimination hypotheses with national-level survey data

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It is well documented that members of racial and ethnic minority groups participate in a variety of outdoor recreation activities at lower rates than whites, and there is a large literature which has explored a number of explanations for this finding. These explanations are usually grouped into three categories: (1) marginality, which focuses on economic reasons for non-participation; (2) discrimination, which centers on the role of hostile behaviors on the part of whites; (3) ethnicity, which purportedly focuses on cultural factors. Despite the size of this literature, it suffers from a number of shortcomings. To begin with, the data used to test the hypotheses are usually not nationally representative. In addition, the possible explanations have not been comprehensively evaluated. For instance, a full range of demographic items has generally not been used in tests of marginality, the discrimination hypothesis has rarely been tested at all, and simple measures of group membership rather than actual measures of culture have usually been employed. In this paper, we add to the literature by testing all three perspectives with national-level data from the National Park Service (NPS) Comprehensive Survey on the American Public and from the General Social Survey (GSS). We examine differences among African Americans, Hispanics, and non-Hispanic whites.

We utilize two dependent variables: whether the respondent has visited a national park during the past two years (from the NPS data), and whether the respondent has gone camping, hiking, or canoeing during the past year (from the GSS data). Since these variables are dichotomous, we use logistic regression to examine the association between these measures and a number of independent variables of interest. We begin by examining the association between the dependent variables and race/ethnicity. Then, we add variables to the model in blocks which correspond to measures of marginality, discrimination, and culture. We note the changes in the size of the race/ethnic effects as additional variables are added to the model, in order to gauge whether a particular hypothesis is supported by the data. For instance, if the marginality hypothesis is true, then the size of the race/ethnic effects should decline when marginality related variables are added to the model.

Our main findings are presented in Table 1. Race/ethnicity is operationalized as a dummy variable, with whites being the excluded category. Our results replicate the well-known finding that African-Americans and Hispanics are both less likely to visit national parks than whites; the difference between African-Americans and Hispanics is not statistically significant. For example, the log-odds of African-Americans having visited a park are 1.230 lower than those for whites. We thought that perhaps some of these

differences were due to variability in place of residence of members of the groups.

However, controlling for Census region changed the results very little. Adding measures of marginality (measured by education, income, and marital status) to the model reduced each race/ethnic coefficient by about .2, which represented about 13% of the African-American/white difference and 22% of the Hispanic/white difference in the model that included region. Next we added our measure of discrimination: whether the respondent felt safe in national parks. This resulted in a decline in of .1 in the African-American and Hispanic coefficients (amounting to 7% for African-Americans when compared to the previous model and 14% for Hispanics). Finally, we added a measure of culture: whether the respondent enjoys out-of-town trips to experience nature. This changed the coefficient for Hispanics very little, but did decrease the value for African-Americans by .2 or 28%, indicating a strong aversion to this type of activity among African-Americans. In the end, then, using the model controlling for region as a baseline, we were able to explain 42% of the African-American/white difference and 30% of the Hispanic/white difference in visitation to national parks. The most important factor in accounting for the lower rate of visitation among African-Americans seems to be an aversion to the types of trips required to get to a national park.

We replicated these results for respondents younger than 45. Among younger people, the differences between Hispanics and whites were smaller. However, those between African-Americans and whites were larger. In addition, our independent variables explained about the same percentage of the Hispanic/white difference when compared to all respondents, but less of the African-American/white difference.

Clearly, our measures of discrimination and culture are imperfect. For instance, feeling unsafe in a national park may be related to things like fear of traffic or of wildlife, in addition to fear of racism. Similarly, an aversion to out-of-town nature trips among African-Americans might be as much a fear of racist encounters during travel (discrimination) as a deeply ingrained group preference (a cultural phenomenon). We thus supplement our analyses of the NPS data with GSS data from 1993; this was the only year in which leisure activity questions were asked in the GSS. In this analysis we found no difference between Hispanics and whites in propensity to go camping, but a large difference between African-Americans and whites. Further, the independent variables explained virtually none of the difference between African-Americans and whites. To measure discrimination, we used a question about allowing racists to

Table 1. Logistic Regression Analyses

National Park Service Data Regressions for All Respondents					
Independent Variables in Model					
Group Compared to Whites	Race/Ethnicity	Region	Region, Education, Income, and Marital Status	All Demographics and Feeling of Safety in National Parks	All Demographics, Feeling of Safety in National Parks, and Whether the Respondent Likes Out-of-Town Nature Trips
African-American	-1.230	-1.219	-1.059	-.984	-.707
Hispanic	-.814	-1.034	-.805	-.690	-.727
Percent Decline in Race/Ethnic Coefficient Compared to Previous Model	African-Americans		13.13%	7.08%	28.15%
	Hispanics		22.15%	14.29%	N/A
National Park Service Data Regressions for Respondents 44 Years of Age and Younger					
African-American	-1.688	-1.775	-1.652	-1.625	-1.310
Hispanic	-.531	-.749	-.529	-.420	-.488
Decline in Race/Ethnic Coefficient Compared to Previous Model	African-Americans		6.92%	1.62%	19.41%
	Hispanics		29.40%	20.57%	N/A
General Social Survey Data Logistic Regressions					
Group Compared to Whites	Race/Ethnicity	Region	Region, Education, Income, and Marital Status	All Demographics and Whether Racists Should be Allowed to Speak	All Demographics, Racist Speech, Religiosity, Musical Tastes, and Sociability
African-American	-2.048	-1.973	-1.916	-1.908	-2.107
Hispanic (coefficients for Hispanics not statistically significant)	.196	-.319	-.145	-.141	-.061
Decline in Race/Ethnic Coefficient Compared to Previous Model	African-Americans		2.89%	0.42%	N/A
	Hispanics		N/A	N/A	N/A
NOTE: Numbers in the rows labeled "African-American" and "Hispanic" are logistic regression coefficients. All are statistically significant at the .05 level unless otherwise noted.					

speak, figuring that African-Americans who did not want to allow this were more likely to have experienced discrimination. As measures of “African-American culture,” we included an item on the frequency of visiting relatives, as well as measures having to do with liking blues and gospel music.

Our results suggest that Hispanic/white differences in outdoor recreational practices are narrower than their African-American/white counterparts and may be declining. In contrast, we find larger and growing differences between African-Americans and whites. Further, it seems as though the cultural hypothesis best explains the African-American/white disparity, not in the sense of what is viewed as “traditional” African-American culture but rather in what appears to be a widespread aversion to these types of activities.