

5-3-1993

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Jones, David M., "Neighborhood Tipping; Blue Hills" (1993). *Hartford Studies Collection: Papers by Students and Faculty*. Paper 21.
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Neighborhood Tipping; Blue Hills

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Sociology 425
Prof. Valocchi
May 3, 1993

When examining the history of a city, one is likely to notice that significant shifts in the population have occurred. As certain groups of people move into a city or neighborhood, other groups may move out. A particular city neighborhood may have been home to a variety of groups at different points in time. For example, the neighborhood bordering Trinity College known as Frog Hollow was predominantly French Canadian several decades ago. More recently however, this neighborhood has become predominantly Hispanic in composition.

There are several theories that exist on how and why neighborhood populations change. In contemporary urban literature, two main factors in neighborhood change are race and socioeconomic status. In the following essay, I will explore a theory of neighborhood change known as "tipping," introduced by Thomas Schelling in the early 1970's. I will use statistical data on a specific Hartford neighborhood to explore this theory of neighborhood change.

The Hartford neighborhood that I have chosen to study is known as Blue Hills, and is located in the northwest corner of the city (see fig1). "The Blue Hills Neighborhood is bounded by the Bloomfield town line to the north, Coventry and Ridgefield Streets to the east, Westbourne Parkway and Albany Avenue to the south, and Bloomfield Avenue and the West Hartford town line to the west."

My statistical data will come primarily from U.S. census data, and neighborhood public school enrollments. These seem to be reliable indicators of neighborhood population composition. In

¹RSA Blue Hills neighborhood profile, 1990 p. 2

compiling this data, I found that one of the most significant problems I faced is the fact that census data is only available every ten years, making it difficult to draw conclusions on what happened over the course of a decade. Also, census tracts, which separate cities into smaller regions were not available prior to 1970. The information on school enrollments however, is available yearly, and ranges as far back as 1964. The data available for this topic ranges from 1964 to 1990.

Tipping

In the discussion of neighborhood change, tipping refers to a process in which entrance of a few members of a minority into a neighborhood causes some among the formerly homogeneous population to leave. Their departure leaves openings into which more members of the minority can enter. The increase in new residents in the neighborhood induces more of the old to leave until a complete or near complete shift in population occurs². In essence what occurs is that a previously segregated majority population is replaced by a completely segregated minority population in the span of a few years. In contemporary U.S. urban analysis, the majority population refers to are whites and the minority population are blacks, although this can vary depending on the neighborhood.

One of the main impulses behind behaviors such as tipping is the perception of the minority group by the majority group. "Peoples behavior depends on how many are behaving a particular way."³ If the majority group perceives a minority group as undesirable neighbors, whether this perception is true or not, the

²Schelling, Thomas C. p. 101

³Schelling p.94

behavior of the majority will reflect that perception. The influx of a minority group that is perceived as undesirable will have a negative effect on the overall satisfaction of the majority.

Level of satisfaction is an important variable when discussing tipping and the dynamics of neighborhood change. Each individual has a certain level of comfort in terms of racial composition of a neighborhood. For example, some whites may feel comfortable only in a neighborhood that is all white, while others may feel comfortable with a ten percent, or some other level minority representation. Blacks on the other hand may feel comfortable living in a neighborhood that is all black, while others may be more tolerant of varying levels of racial composition. In the process of neighborhood tipping, as one minority household moves in, it causes the households that have a 100 percent majority comfort level to be uncomfortable* As they move, more of this minority may move in causing others to be uncomfortable. By the same token, members of a minority who would not move into a homogeneous majority community feel more comfortable moving in, as minority representation in the community increases. What develops is a tipping out of the majority and a tipping in of the minority.

On average, blacks in American society have lower incomes than whites, hence a perception that may develop within a white majority neighborhood is that neighborhood property values are declining when blacks move in. This preference is based on perception. Leven argues that

racial change is seen as a harbinger of income change, even to the extent where racial change in adjacent neighborhoods inspires the expectation of local change in income status, so that perceived values can begin to fall within a neighborhood before either racial or income change has actually occurred

within recognized boundaries:
What is evident here is that expectations that are based on perceptions of race are stronger than expectations based on income. Leven argues that neighborhoods "decline" faster when there is a racial change, and that housing values decline more slowly when there is only a decline in income.

"Economically based separation is also intermixed with discrimination. To choose a neighborhood is to choose neighbors. . . . People may furthermore rely even in making economic choices, on information that is color-discriminating; believing that darker skinned people are on the average poorer than lighter skinned, one may consciously or unconsciously rely on color as an index of poverty or, believing that others rely on color as an index, adopt their signals and indices accordingly."⁵
Here Schelling points out that economic decisions often have racial undertones in American society. Independent of an individual's personal beliefs regarding other racial groups, neighborhood decisions will be made on the association between race and income. Hence, people who have to choose between polarized extremes, will most likely choose a position that reinforces that polarization.⁶

One of the most interesting things about this phenomenon is that what we refer to as economic decisions have less to do with income in a particular neighborhood, than they do with other social factors. People tend to make economic decisions on the basis of some sort of discrimination, which we will refer to as preference. People have a certain preference as to who they want their neighbors to be, who they want their children to go to school with, who they want themselves and their children to associate with.

⁴ Leven, introduction p. xv

⁵ Schelling p. 139

⁶ Schelling p. 146

Now that we have discussed the process of tipping, we can look at some of the characteristics of the Blue Hills neighborhood, and see how they have changed over time.

Blue Hills

Blue Hills is a neighborhood that developed around the turn of the century as a more exclusive area of Hartford; a sort of streetcar suburb within the city. The houses in Blue Hills were often custom built and suburban in nature. The neighborhood developed as a predominately Jewish and Irish area. A good example of the Jewish influence in this neighborhood are institutions such as Mt. Sinai hospital and St. Justin's private school. "Everything in Blue Hills was first class..."⁷

Beginning in the late 1950's the Jewish community, a major constituency of the neighborhood began to move northward to Bloomfield because of the establishment of the Jewish community center there⁸. It was around this time that a few African-Americans found homes in Blue Hills. By the mid 1970's, Blue Hills was a neighborhood that was roughly balanced between whites and blacks. A balance that was desired by some blacks and liberal whites. More recently Blue Hills is predominately a black neighborhood which is home to a number of black politicians and officials. The withdrawal of the Jewish community is nearly complete, with St. Justin's closing this past Year, and Mt. Sinai hospital merging with St. Francis Hospital⁹. Changes have certainly occurred in Blue Hills over the past few decades. What

⁷RSA Blue Hills neighborhood profile, 1990 p.3

⁸RSA Blue Hills neighborhood profile, 1990 p. 3

⁹RSA Blue Hills neighborhood profile, 1990 p. 3

exactly happened here?

During the 1960's Hartford as a whole experienced a significant population change. From 1960 to 1970, 25,000 whites left Hartford and 21,000 non - whites replaced them.¹⁰ Census data from 1960 to 1970 shows that the population of Hartford changed significantly in that decade. A change in the population of a city is bound to have some an effect on the neighborhoods of the city. Blue Hills was no exception. "The Blue Hills neighborhood had the third largest population change in the city, with 4,800 non - whites replacing 4,282 whites."¹¹

The late 1950's early 1960's was a significant period in terms of the opportunities in the labor market for blacks. With gains that were made partly as a result of the civil rights movement, as well as a healthy Northern economy, blacks found themselves in a position of increasingly upward mobility. A number of blacks were going to school and entering the professional business world, others came from the South and found work as skilled and semi - skilled workers. These jobs provided formidable incomes and upward mobility. As blacks sought housing to accommodate there increased economic success, they often looked to the suburbs. However, blacks often faced discrimination when trying to find housing in the suburbs. (My parents experienced this sort of discrimination in the mid1960's.) For a number of blacks housing was effectively limited to the city by discriminating suburbs. Blue Hills was one of the most exclusive neighborhood in the city. As a result, many upwardly mobile blacks sought, and found housing there.

¹⁰ Saltman, Juliet p. 164.

¹¹ Saltman p. 165

What impact did this have on the overall neighborhood population? An increase in upwardly mobile blacks, in conjunction with the erection of housing projects through urban renewal, led many whites to leave Blue Hills. "By 1965 the Blue Hills neighborhood was about 30% black." As openings in housing were made available through white flight, the vacancies were filled by blacks.

Changes in the racial composition of a neighborhood are reflected in public school enrollment. The public schools in Blue Hills are Mark Twain, Annie Fischer, Rawson, and Weaver High School. (see fig2) In 1965 the black population of Blue hills was around thirty percent. In the Blue Hills public school system, the number is 47.3%. Here it is evident that population changes within this neighborhood occurred more slowly than changes in public school enrollments. Figure 4 shows that public school enrollments in Blue Hills shifted from predominantly white to predominately black approximately ten years before the population did. Comparing census data with school enrollments over the years, it is apparent that this discrepancy between black neighborhood population and black school enrollment has diminished, However, the percentages of blacks in Blue Hills public schools is still significantly higher than the population as a whole. This is most likely due to an increasing proportion of relatively young blacks moving into the neighborhood, and an aging white population.

We have seen what has occurred in Blue Hills over time along racial lines. Considering what we know about tipping and the

¹² Saltman p. 170

¹³ Hartford Board of Education. info

dynamics of neighborhood change, it is also necessary to look at Blue Hills in terms of changes in income.

With the significant changes that occurred in the racial composition of Blue Hills in 1960's and 1970's, there was a decrease in the income level of Blue Hills residents. This decrease was not on the scale of the population change, but it was nonetheless significant. I did not have the median income information available for every census from 1970 to 1990. However, I did have income on the percentages of renter occupied and owner occupied housing for those three census years. The significance of this particular statistic is that as neighborhood incomes go down, there tends to be a decrease in the percentage of owner occupied housing, and an increase in renter occupied housing, which means that owner/renter occupancy should be a pretty good predictor of income. It is also a good predictor of the stability of a neighborhood, because owners tend to stay longer and have a more vested interest in the maintenance of the neighborhood.

Figure 6 shows the percentages of renter occupied and owner occupied housing in Blue Hills in 1970, 1980, and 1990. Although a great deal of change occurred in the neighborhood between 1960 and 1970, figures 3 and 4 show that significant change occurred since then. Therefore we can still compare that change in population with the owner/renter percentages. Looking at the percentages of owner and renter occupied housing, we see that there really isn't a significant change in the percentages, despite a decline in income. This suggests that although income has declined, owner occupancy hasn't decreased, which means there

is a fairly consistent element of stability in the neighborhood.

In this regard, Saltman states that

Income in Blue Hills during that decade [1960 - 1970], which had exceeded city, state, and national averages in 1960, failed to sustain that level by 1970. It did exceed the nationwide average, however, and its level of owner occupancy remained high, despite the decrease [income] stability. Thus, though Blue Hills still attracted homeowners, they were primarily nonwhite and lower in income than their predecessors!⁴

Conclusions

In examining Blue Hills over the past two and one-half decades, it is pretty evident that significant amount of change has occurred. Literature on the dynamics of neighborhood change, particular tipping, indicate that neighborhoods change primarily along race and income lines. Of these two factors race appears to be the more significant of the two, and in American society it is to a certain extent a predictor of income. Examining these two factors, we can conclude that the Blue Hills neighborhood did tip along race and income lines.

In closing, I would like to note that although ideally we all should live in integrated neighborhoods in which everyone is satisfied and comfortable with their neighbors. However, this situation rarely exists in American society, and if it does it is short lived. Fundamentally speaking, neighborhoods in American society will continue to "tip" as long as long as 1) income is a function of race; and 2) neighborhood satisfaction and preference is measured by the degree to which people are isolated from those who are not like them. Either we as Americans realize that diversity exists and continues to exist in this society, or we

⁴p. 165

will continually uproot every time a minority group achieves the mobility which places them in contact with the majority.

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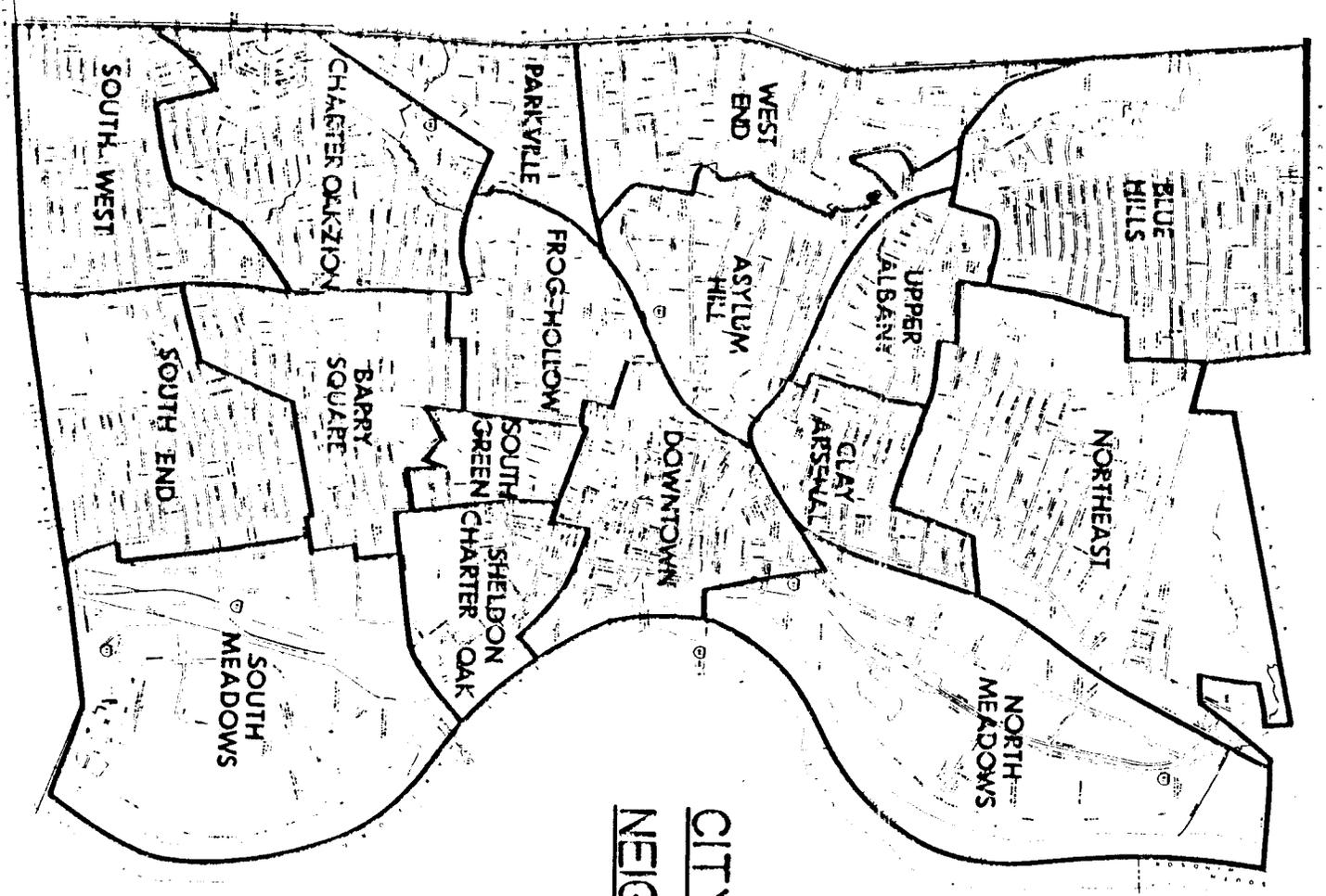
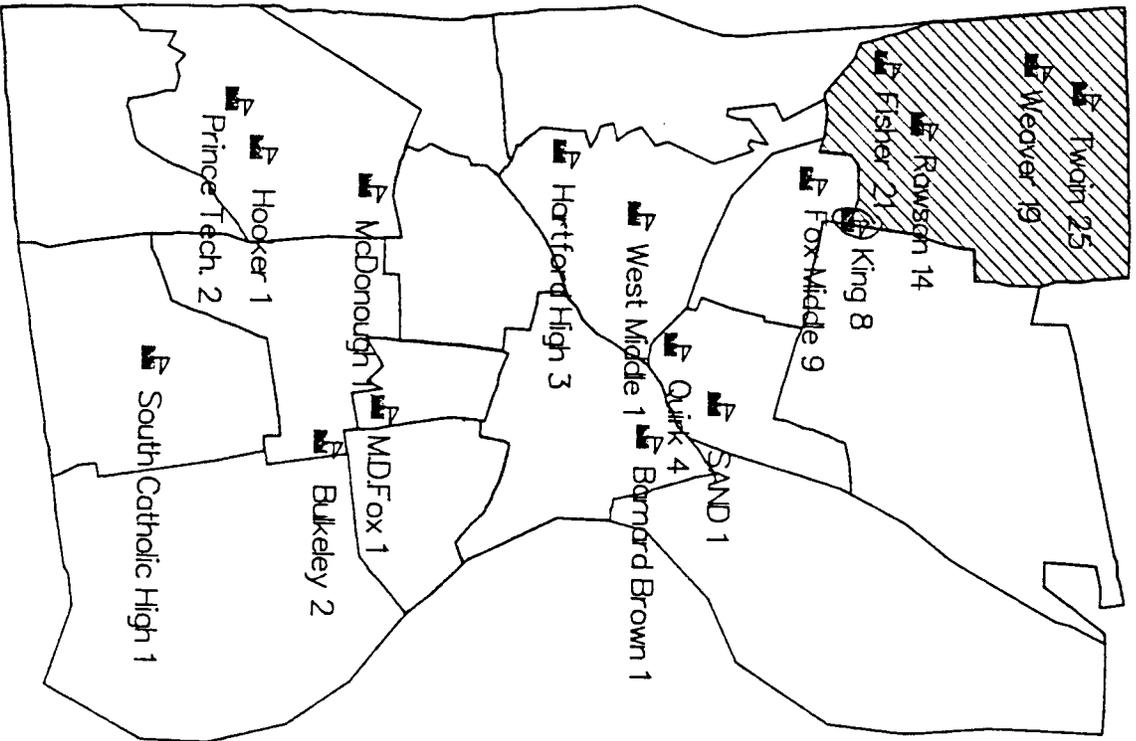


Fig 1

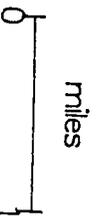
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Schools Attended



Other Institutions in Hartford 24
 Other Institutions in CT 5

Fig 2



Data from "blue hills info"

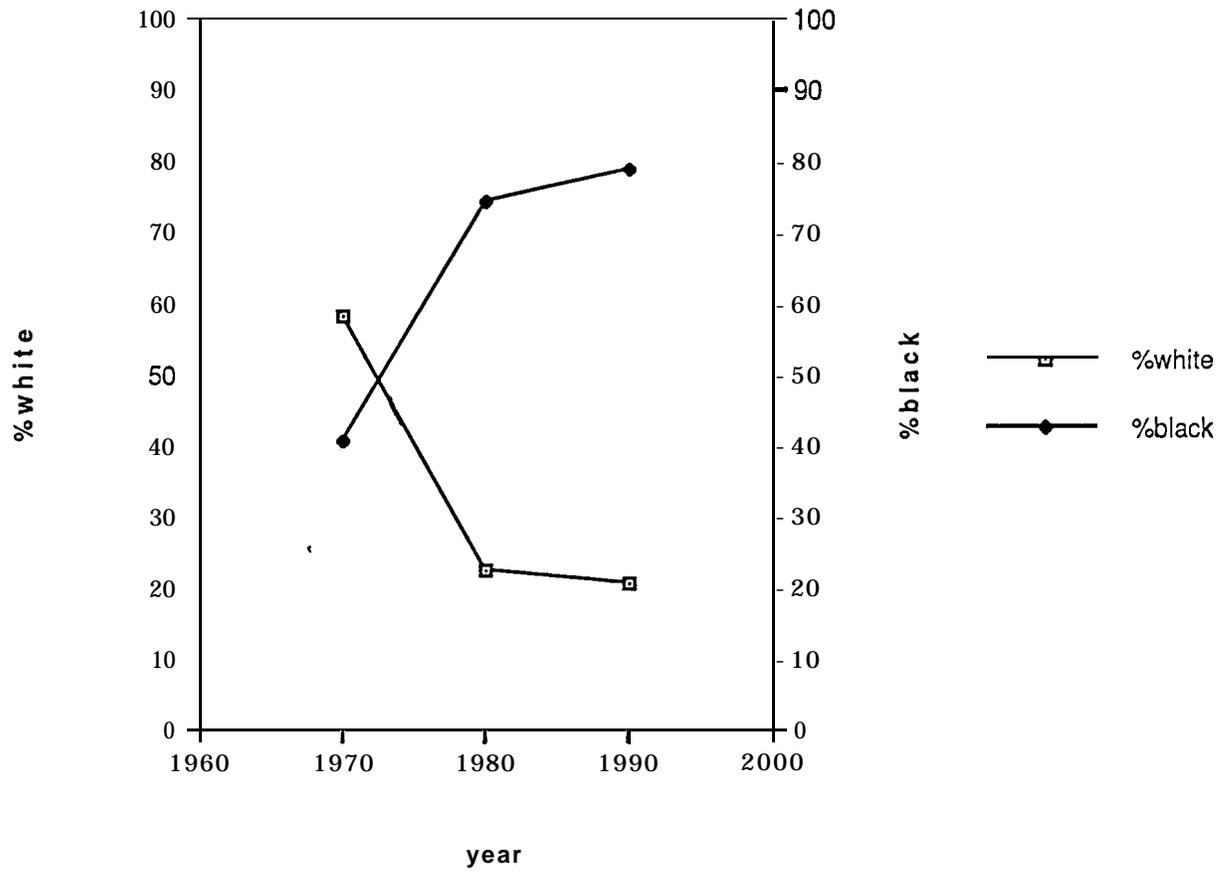


Fig 3 Blue Hills population

Data from Hartford Board of Ed.

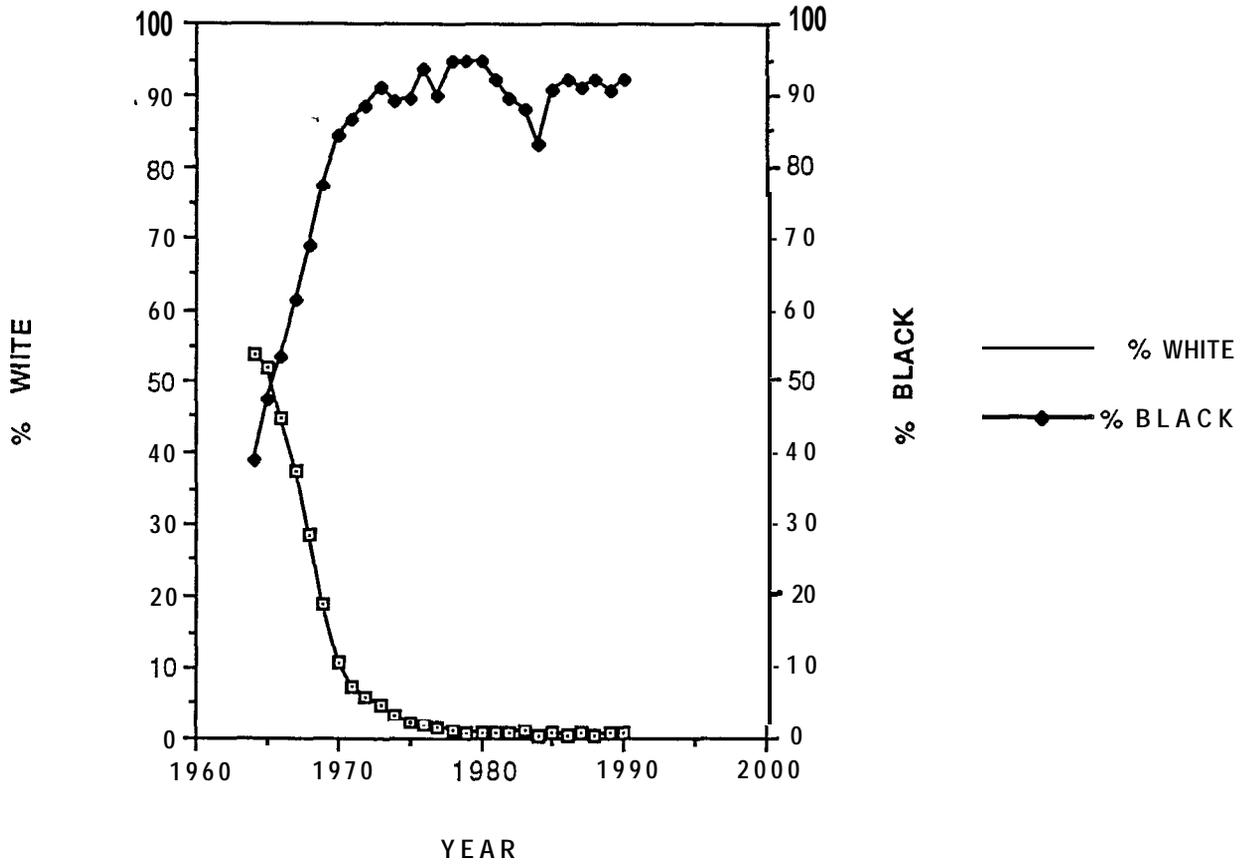


Fig 4. Blue Hills Schools

Data from Hartford Board of Ed.
 Data from blue hills info

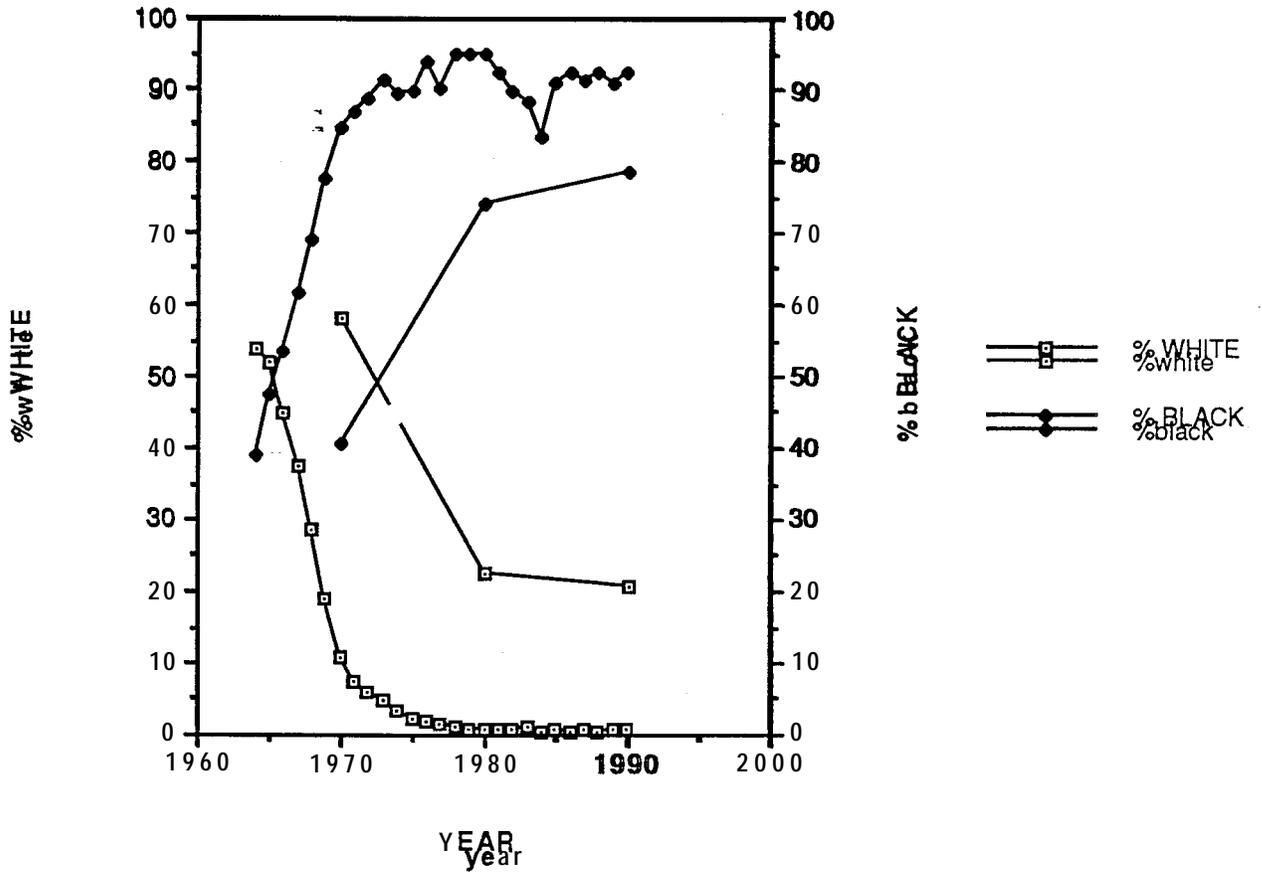


Fig 5: Superimposition of 3 & 4

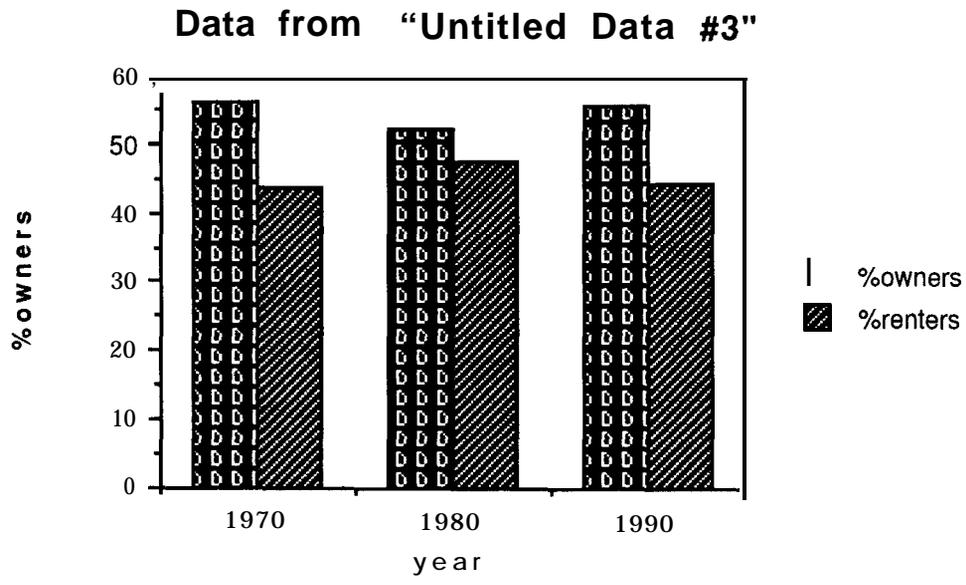


Fig 6: % Renter & Owner occupied housing