Inside the Wire

Economic Changes Between 2009 and 2014 in Montgomery County, Maryland’s Eruv Communities

Background

An eruv is a blend of public and private urban space. It is a wire strung between telephone poles, buildings, and other elements of the built environment to create an enclosure around an area of several square miles. In Hebrew, the word eruv literally means “blending” or “mixing.” It was developed to circumvent the Jewish laws of the Sabbath that prohibit adherents from working. According to these laws, carrying in public is considered working. Exceptions are made for “carrying” clothes on your body, for instance, but carrying a child, a book, or food into the public domain, is actually prohibited. According to Jewish law, an eruv effectively turns a public domain into a private domain. For observant Jews that adhere to these laws, life “inside the wire” can be much easier. Eruvim are a little-known and understudied urban phenomenon. Residents living within one often don’t even know that they do—and that includes Jewish residents. The only people that benefit from the existence of an eruv are Orthodox Jews. Orthodox communities will come together, fundraise, and lobby local municipalities to have them erected—but not without controversy. Unsympathetic residents living within a proposed eruv zone often fear that its presence will change their neighborhood in undesirable ways. Residents may fear that an influx of Orthodox Jews will bring unwanted economic changes to the community. This project makes an attempt to demystify these changes by asking the question: How do median household income and median home value within eruv communities change over time with respect to changes at the county level?

Where is Montgomery County?

The Six Eruvim

Methodology & Challenges

American Community Survey (ACS) census data from 2009 and 2014 were joined to block groups in Montgomery County, Maryland. Then, by selecting the block groups in the eruv areas, the relevant census data could be isolated to perform analysis. By using GIS as a “spatial calculator,” two fascinating trends were uncovered. The principal challenge in conducting this research was that the 2014 ACS data corresponds to 2010 census block groups and the 2009 ACS data corresponds 2002 block groups. The precise boundaries of the block groups can be, and often are, different. These differences were reconciled by performing a bilateral comparison of the block group boundaries and carefully screening-out block groups that change dramatically between censuses.

Summary of Results

Change in Median Home Value in Eruv Areas from 2009 to 2014 by Block Group

Discussion of Results & Conclusion

While it appears that the entire county suffered economically between 2009 and 2014, the eruv communities appeared to have suffered 4% less in median home value and 2% less in median household income than the county as a whole. Based on the premium that some residents are willing to pay to live within an eruv, it's conceivable that the an eruv can act as a shield against negative macroeconomic changes. The study does not prove causation, but indicates a fascinating correlation. Perhaps the fear around the construction of eruvim has much more to do with prejudices against Orthodox Jews than with actual economic outcomes. Further research should be done on the topic to establish causation.

Data Sources

State – Political = Maryland Political Boundaries (State Boundaries); MD GID, Standard Mapping and GIS Data Portal; Accessed March 2016, Published 2012
State – Physical = Maryland Physical Boundaries = County Boundaries (Generalized); MD GID, Standard Mapping and GIS Data Portal; Accessed March 2016, Published 2012
County – Political = Montgomery County Boundaries (Generalized); MD GID, Standard Mapping and GIS Data Portal; Accessed March 2016, Published 2012
County – Physical = Montgomery County Boundaries (Generalized); MD GID, Standard Mapping and GIS Data Portal; Accessed March 2016, Published 2012
Base Map = USGS Quadrangle Color: Chase’s Ferry, Maryland; Published 1958, 1963, 1977
Ownership & Land Use = US Government Census Data, 2009–2013 American Community Survey (5 Year Estimates), County Boundaries (Generalized); MD iMAP: Maryland’s Mapping and GIS Data Portal; Accessed March 2016, Published 2012
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