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## **The Racial/Ethnic Distribution of Heat Risk-Related Land Cover in Relation to Residential Segregation**

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### **Abbreviations and Definitions:**

CBSA            Core-based statistical area

CI              Confidence interval

$D_m$	Multigroup Dissimilarity Index
HRRLC	Heat risk-related land cover
NLCD	National Land Cover Dataset
U. S.	United States

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To examine the distribution of heat risk-related land cover (HRRLC) characteristics across racial/ethnic groups and degrees of residential segregation.

**Methods:** Block group-level tree canopy and impervious surface estimates were derived from the 2001 National Land Cover Dataset for densely populated urban areas of the United States and Puerto Rico, and linked to demographic characteristics from the 2000 Census. Racial/ethnic groups in a given block group were considered to live in HRRLC if at least half their population experienced the absence of tree canopy *and* at least half of the ground covered by impervious surface (roofs, driveways, sidewalks, roads). Residential segregation was characterized for metropolitan areas in the United States and Puerto Rico using the multigroup dissimilarity index.

**Results:** After adjusting for ecoregion and precipitation, and holding segregation level constant, non-Hispanic blacks were 52% more likely (95% confidence interval (CI): 37% to 69%), non-Hispanic Asians 32% more likely (95% CI: 18% to 47%), and Hispanics 21% more likely (95% CI: 8% to 35%) to live in HRRLC conditions compared to non-Hispanic whites. Within each racial/ethnic group, HRRLC conditions increased with increasing degrees of metropolitan area-level segregation. Further adjustment for home ownership and poverty did not substantially alter these results, but adjustment for population density and metropolitan area population attenuated the segregation effects, suggesting a mediating or confounding role.

**Conclusions:** Land cover was associated with segregation within each racial/ethnic group, which may be partially explained by the concentration of racial/ethnic minorities into densely populated neighborhoods within larger, more segregated cities. In anticipation of greater frequency and duration of extreme heat events, climate change adaptation strategies, such as planting trees in

urban areas, should explicitly incorporate an environmental justice framework that addresses racial/ethnic disparities in HRRLC.

## INTRODUCTION

In the U. S., extreme heat events are responsible for about 1 in 5 natural hazard deaths (Borden and Cutter 2008). Because of climate change, many cities are expected to become warmer (IPCC 2007) with "more intense, more frequent, and longer lasting" heat waves (Meehl and Tebaldi 2004). Furthermore, studies of extreme heat have shown large racial disparities in heat-related deaths (Greenberg et al. 1983; Jones et al. 1982; Kaiser et al. 2007; O'Neill et al. 2005; Schwartz 2005), although this is not universally the case (Ramlow and Kuller 1990; Weisskopf et al. 2002), and in at least one case, whites have been more affected than minority groups (Ellis et al. 1975). Land cover characteristics may contribute to these disparities (Uejio et al. 2011). Urban tree canopy is an important local mitigating factor for extreme heat (Oke et al. 1989; Hart and Sailor 2009), while impervious surfaces play a primary role in creating urban heat island effects (Oke 1982).

Urban trees provide several environmental amenities (Givoni 1991), including shade on hot days (Scott et al. 1999), reductions in wastewater loads on treatment facilities (Keim et al. 2006), and reduced air pollution (Hwang et al. 2011; Nowak 1994) and noise pollution (Samara and Tsoni 2011) from vehicular traffic. Research also suggests that urban trees are associated with reduced all-cause mortality after adjustment for neighborhood deprivation (Mitchell et al. 2011), and green spaces are associated with many positive health outcomes (Lee and Maheswaran 2010), including improved pregnancy outcomes (Dadvand et al. 2012). Studies in the United States have documented racial/ethnic disparities in urban tree canopy, usually in the direction of racial/ethnic minorities living in neighborhoods with lower tree coverage (Heynen et al. 2006, Landry and Chakraborty 2009, Lowry et al. 2011, Ogneva-Himmelberger et al. 2009, Perkins and Heynen 2004, Zhang et al. 2008), but some counter-examples exist (Boone et al. 2010, Troy













block group according to Level I ecoregions developed by Omernik (Commission for Environmental Cooperation 1997) to classify regions with similar ecological characteristics and environmental resources. We combined ecoregions that included < 5 metropolitan areas (temperate Sierras and northwestern forested mountains, and southern semi-arid highlands and North American deserts)] and assigned Hawaii and Puerto Rico to the tropical wet forests ecoregion, resulting in a variable with 8 possible categories. We also considered local-area climatic variation in average annual precipitation and average precipitation during the driest month of each year for each census block group using layers developed by the United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (USDA NRCS 2011). We calculated these parameters for each block group using the same projection as for the land cover characteristics.

#### *Analytic approach*

We used robust Poisson models to estimate prevalence ratios (Deddens and Petersen 2008) for the co-occurrence of two dichotomous heat risk-related measures: whether at least half of a sub-population of a census block group lived in census blocks with no tree canopy reported in the NLCD and at least half of a sub-population of a census block group lived in census blocks with at least 50% impervious surface.

We used a generalized estimating equation approach for all models to account for the fact that up to eight sub-populations might be assessed within each block group, and thus there were closely correlated measures for each block group. We weighted sub-populations within each block group by population, with a sum equal to the number of block groups in the analysis:

$$\text{weight}_{rti} = (\text{Number of block groups} * \text{population}_{rti}) / N, \quad [3]$$

where  $r$  indexes the racial/ethnic group,  $t$  indexes whether they live in a rented or owner-occupied housing unit,  $i$  indexes the block group, and  $N$  indicates the total size of the eligible population, 81,517,417.

The first set of models we examined contained only race/ethnicity, and an interaction term between race/ethnicity and racial/ethnic residential segregation, to yield four estimates of the association between segregation and HRRLC within each racial/ethnic group.

$$\text{HRRLC}_{irt} = \exp(\alpha + \beta X_r + \gamma X_r D_{mi} + \varepsilon_{irt}) \quad [4]$$

where  $i$ ,  $r$ , and  $t$  represent the same indices described above,  $X$  represents the racial/ethnic groups relative to whites,  $\beta$  parameterizes racial/ethnic differences relative to whites, and  $\gamma$  parameterizes the association of segregation with HRRLC within each racial/ethnic group.

In the second set of models, we adjusted for biophysical covariates: average annual rainfall (as 6 categories; under 10"/year, then in 10"/year increments, with rainfall averages above 50"/year grouped together), average rainfall in the driest month of the year (in 5 categories; none, under 1", 1-2", 2-3", and 3" or greater), and Omernik's level I ecoregions (eight categories after collapsing 2 sparsely populated ecoregions).

In further modeling exercises, we considered variables that could alter the observed association between segregation and land cover characteristics through confounding or mediation. Home ownership and poverty have often been linked to the likelihood of having trees on both private and public lands (Heynen 2006; Heynen and Lindsey 2003; Heynen et al. 2006; Iverson and Cook, 2000). These factors might theoretically be part of the causal pathway between

segregation, race/ethnicity, and land cover characteristics, especially given *de jure* and *de facto* discrimination in historical and contemporary home mortgage lending that restrict where racial minority populations live (Ghent et al. 2011; Hillier 2003). We added categorical terms for housing tenure (renter vs. home-owner) and household income relative to poverty (under poverty, near poverty, or household income at least twice poverty) to the model containing the biophysical variables to assess whether associations between land cover, race/ethnicity and residential segregation seen in models controlling only for biophysical variables changed with adjustment for these variables. In sensitivity analyses, we also examined adding housing tenure terms or poverty terms separately.

In more segregated metropolitan areas, racial/ethnic minority groups tend to be clustered in densely populated neighborhoods near the central business district, and/or in ‘wedges’ extending outwards from this central point (Berry and Kasarda 1977, p. 90), while a ring of almost exclusively white suburban areas surrounds the metropolitan area at or near the limits of tolerable commuting distances. It is quite possible that the main effect of segregation on the distribution of land cover experienced by racial minority groups is mediated through the phenomenon of concentrating minority groups into densely populated neighborhoods. Moreover, more populous metropolitan areas tend to have a more segregated character (Iceland et al. 2002). Metropolitan area population size may precede residential segregation on the causal pathway affecting the distribution of land cover. Therefore, we examined models that included these two factors in addition to the biophysical variables.

We conducted sensitivity analyses with  $D_m$  modeled as a categorical versus continuous variable to assess the assumption of a linear relationship between  $D_m$  and the HRRLC outcome variables in the robust Poisson model, and to explore whether associations between land cover and

race/ethnicity or segregation varied depending on the method we used to classify HRRLC. We also examined associations with tree canopy and impervious surface as separate components.

## RESULTS

There were 63,436 block groups that met our eligibility criteria. These were distributed across 304 metropolitan areas, and contained 81,517,417 eligible residents, about 29% of the U. S. population in the 2000 Census. Supplemental Material Figure S1 shows a national map of the metropolitan areas included in our analysis by level of segregation. Table 1 shows the distribution of the population across race/ethnicity, housing tenure, household income relative to poverty, and categories of  $D_m$ . Twenty six percent of our study population was Hispanic (of any racial identity), 19% were black, 7% Asian, and the remaining 48% were white.

Overall, 42% of the entire study population lived in block groups where at least half the population sub-group lived in blocks with no tree canopy in the NLCD, 62% lived in block groups where at least half the population sub-group lived in blocks with  $> 50\%$  impervious surface, and 36% lived in block groups that met both heat risk-related land cover criteria. Overall, racial/ethnic minority groups were more likely to live in areas with heat risk-related land cover than whites, particularly Hispanics and Asians. For example, 29% of whites lived in block groups with no tree canopy and mostly covered with impervious surface, as did 31% of blacks, 50% of Hispanics, and 54% of Asians. Residents of rented housing units were more likely to live in areas with both HRRLC characteristics than residents of owner-occupied housing units, and those with a household income below poverty were more likely to live in these areas than those with higher levels of household income.

Residents of metropolitan areas with a  $D_m$  between 0.50 and 0.60 were the most likely to have HRRLC characteristics (Table 1).

Table 2 shows modeling results for the joint occurrence of low tree canopy and high levels of impervious surface by race/ethnicity and segregation level. In the baseline models, the association between HRRLC and segregation was largest among whites (12% increased prevalence per 0.10 increase in  $D_m$ , 95% CI: 10% to 13%), and was slightly negative among blacks. In addition, the prevalence of HRRLC for blacks, Asians, and Hispanics was about twice that of whites [e.g., a 100% increased prevalence (95% CI: 84, 118%) for Hispanics relative to whites] after adjustment for  $D_m$ . Racial/ethnic disparities in HRRLC remained after adjustment for Omernik ecoregion and rainfall patterns, although the magnitude of these disparities was diminished, with prevalence increased by only 21 to 52% (for Hispanics and blacks, respectively) relative to whites. In contrast, associations between segregation and HRRLC were stronger and positive for all 4 racial/ethnic groups (27 to 37% increased prevalence per 0.10 unit increase in  $D_m$ ). Further adjustment for housing tenure and household income relative to poverty had very little impact on the effect estimates; no estimates changed by 10% or more. However, adjustment for block group population density and metropolitan area population size in addition to Omernik ecoregion and rainfall shifted estimates for the association between HRRLC and segregation toward the null by more than 10%. The disparity between Hispanics and whites increased by more than 10% with this adjustment, while associations between black and Asian race/ethnicity and HRRLC were not substantially affected.

### *Sensitivity Analyses*

Models of associations with > 50% impervious surface or no tree canopy as separate outcomes (Supplemental Material, Table S1) suggest that segregation is more strongly associated with a



lack of tree canopy cover than with impervious surface. Separate models adjusted for the biophysical variables (Omernik ecoregion and rainfall) plus either home ownership, poverty, block group population density, or metropolitan or population size (Supplemental Material, Table S2) indicated that adjustment for both population density and metropolitan area population size decreased associations between land cover disparities and segregation levels towards the null.

Results of models in which segregation, represented by the multigroup dissimilarity index  $D_m$ , was modeled as a categorical variable defined using "round number" cut-points (0.40, 0.50, 0.60), quartiles of the population-weighted distribution (0.467, 0.526, 0.606), and cut-points between four groups of 76 metropolitan areas (0.381, 0.4571, 0.523) were generally consistent with models of  $D_m$  as a continuous variable (Supplemental Material, Table S3.) Specifically, in most cases HRRLC increased monotonically with increasing segregation in each race/ethnicity group, though there was some heterogeneity depending upon which cut-point schema is used. Using alternate cut-points to dichotomize tree canopy (i.e., < 10% or < 20% instead of no tree canopy versus any) or impervious surface (> 70% or > 80% versus > 50%) also did not qualitatively alter the results (Supplemental Material, Table S4).

## **DISCUSSION**

At a national scale, we found racial/ethnic disparities in heat risk-related land cover characteristics. We anticipated that these disparities might be due to confounding by biophysical factors that strongly influence tree growth, but found that racial disparities remained after adjustment for these factors.

Adjusting for home ownership and household poverty did not substantially alter associations between HRRLC and race/ethnicity or metropolitan area segregation levels within each racial/ethnic group. However, adjusting for block group population density and metropolitan area population size substantially attenuated effect estimates for segregation, suggesting that these variables either precede or are in the causal pathway between segregation and HRRLC characteristics. This is consistent with previous work indicating that segregation tends to concentrate racial/ethnic minority groups into densely populated neighborhoods, particularly in larger cities (Iceland et al. 2002; Lichter 1985; Massey and Denton 1989), which in turn are likely to have fewer trees and more impervious surfaces (Iverson and Cook 2000, Pozzi and Small 2001).

Given that the degree of segregation between blacks and whites is generally larger than between whites and either Asians or Hispanics (Iceland et al. 2002), we anticipated that the largest disparity in HRRLC characteristics would be between blacks and whites. At first glance, blacks and whites appeared nearly equally likely to share these adverse built environment characteristics on a national level (Table 1); the largest disparities in land cover characteristics were between whites and Asians, and between whites and Hispanics. However, after adjustment for Omernik ecoregion, precipitation patterns, and segregation (Table 2), the largest racial/ethnic disparity in HRRLC characteristics was between blacks and whites.

Living in a neighborhood with high HRRLC may not necessarily translate to greater risk of heat-related illness. Our finding of comparable prevalences of HRRLC in blacks and whites without adjustment for segregation or other factors (31% and 29%, respectively, versus 50% for Hispanics) is not entirely consistent with evidence of higher risk of heat-related mortality among African-Americans compared to whites (Basu and Ostro 2008; Greenberg et al. 1983; Kaiser et

al. 2007; O'Neill et al. 2005; Schwartz 2005), and lower risk among Hispanics relative to whites (Basu and Ostro 2008; Whitman et al. 1997) . However, consistent with our finding that Asians had the highest prevalence of HRRLC (54%), Asians were more likely to go to an emergency department for heat-related illnesses during California's 2006 heat wave (RR of 11.4 [95% CI: 5.5 to 27] relative to a comparison period) than were whites (RR=6.3, 95% CI: 5.4 to 7.3), Hispanics (RR=6.5, 95% CI: 5.3 to 8.0), or blacks (RR=5.3, 95% CI: 3.8 to 7.4) (Knowlton et al. 2009).

Some of this inconsistency may be explained by other risk factors that are also associated with heat-related illness. Existing racial/ethnic disparities in chronic diseases that increase susceptibility to heat such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes (Bouchama et al. 2007; Schwartz 2005), differential representation in physical and outdoor occupations (Greenberg et al. 1983), unequal access to air conditioning (O'Neill et al. 2005, English et al. 2007), and social isolation (Klinenberg 2002) may explain a good deal of the observed disparate health outcomes despite relatively similar land cover characteristics between blacks and whites.

### *Limitations*

The NLCD assessment of tree canopy and impervious surface was part of a project to categorize land cover across the United States; adaptation of these measures to assess local variation in heat risk introduces misclassification. An analysis of the accuracy of tree canopy and impervious surface estimates in the 2001 NLCD revealed that there was a consistent undercount of tree canopy in all regions of the country. Misclassification ranged from an 11.3% overcount to a 34.7% undercount in developed areas (Nowak and Geenfield 2010). Because the NLCD used smoothing techniques to characterize 30 meter pixels, areas with sparsely planted trees might be classified as having no trees whatsoever, which may tend to overestimate heat risk in densely-

populated neighborhoods. The degree of misclassification of impervious surface was also quite variable, from a 29.0% undercount to a 19.7% overcount across developed regions of the country. It is difficult to predict how this misclassification would bias our results.

The NLCD classification of impervious surface is mainly intended to distinguish between urbanized and non-urbanized areas, whereas the albedo of paved and roofed areas is a dominant consideration for urban heat (US EPA 2011). Harlan and colleagues (2006) examined 8 select neighborhoods in Phoenix and found that areas with higher proportions of minority residents tended to have housing with darker roofs. In the absence of systematic evidence about the racial/ethnic distribution of the albedo of impervious surfaces, we are hesitant to speculate as to how accounting for albedo in addition to the presence of impervious surface would alter our observations.

Our analysis also does not account for any differences in pavement permeability, which can have a large impact on local surface temperatures (Haselbach et al. 2011), or other contributions to heat risk, including waste heat from energy consumed by cars and buildings (Rizwan et al. 2008) and the “urban canyon” effect created by tall buildings (Oke 1982).

Although the NLCD has produced more recent data on impervious surface (Fry et al. 2011), the 2001 dataset remains the most recent nationally consistent assessment of tree canopy. We elected to match the impervious surface data and Census data closest in time to the tree canopy data. It is possible that tree planting efforts in metropolitan areas in the intervening years may have altered the patterns we observed. It is difficult to predict whether these tree planting efforts would have reduced or exacerbated racial disparities in heat-risk related land cover on a national level.

The biophysical variables we used as controls may not have captured important factors that affect tree growth and are independent of the built environment. We did not account for soil composition, ground slope or aspect, proximity to riparian areas, or temperature characteristics (Lowry et al. 2011). However, unless these factors were distributed in a very different manner than the three biophysical variables we did consider, they would be unlikely to offset the dramatic differences in model results we observed after controlling for these biophysical variables.

Several analyses have attempted to predict the likely frequency of future extreme heat events (Lau and Nath 2012; Meehl and Tebaldi 2004), and some have attempted to assess the likely differential impact of these extreme heat events on specific populations, such as the elderly (Jackson et al. 2010). Our analysis did not incorporate heat-related morbidity and mortality data or climatic projections to assess potential racial/ethnic disparities in health risks from climate change; this would be an area worthy of future research.

## **CONCLUSION**

The U. S. Environmental Protection Agency recommends both increased tree canopy and changes in roof and pavement characteristics to reduce urban heat intensity (US EPA 2011). Many cities have developed plans to mitigate future heat risks, largely through adopting strategies that promote tree planting and high albedo roofs and pavements (US EPA 2011). Results of this analysis highlight the idea that urban planning to mitigate future extreme heat should proactively incorporate an environmental justice perspective and address racial/ethnic disparities in land cover characteristics.

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**Table 1.** Proportion of urban residents living in areas with no tree canopy, high proportions of impervious surface, and both conditions, by race/ethnicity, segregation, housing tenure and poverty.

Characteristic	total population <sup>a</sup>		no tree canopy	over 50% impervious surface	both conditions
	n	%			
Total population	81,517,417	100.0%	42.1%	62.2%	36.5%
0.13<D <sub>m</sub> <0.40 (97 CBSAs)	7,168,971	8.8%	15.2%	54.9%	10.5%
0.40<=D <sub>m</sub> <0.50 (105 CBSAs)	17,696,848	21.7%	40.7%	54.9%	33.9%
0.50<=D <sub>m</sub> <0.60 (78 CBSAs)	28,334,868	34.8%	52.4%	60.5%	43.0%
0.60<=D <sub>m</sub> <0.76 (24 CBSAs)	28,326,730	34.7%	38.9%	69.2%	37.7%
Hispanics	21,360,877	26.2%	56.8%	72.3%	49.8%
-					
Asians	5,555,510	6.8%	58.8%	76.5%	53.7%
blacks	15,343,325	18.8%	34.2%	61.8%	31.1%
whites	39,257,705	48.2%	34.4%	54.0%	28.6%
rented housing units	39,409,709	48.3%	46.2%	72.0%	42.4%
owner-occupied	42,117,708	51.7%	37.9%	52.2%	30.6%
under poverty	14,038,788	17.2%	46.1%	68.7%	41.3%
near poverty	16,283,421	20.0%	44.8%	65.4%	39.4%
at least twice poverty level	51,205,208	62.8%	39.8%	58.7%	34.0%

<sup>a</sup>81,517,417 individuals in 63,436 block groups in 304 metropolitan areas.

**Table 2.** Estimated prevalence ratios and 95% confidence limits for no tree canopy and at least 50% impervious surface, by race/ethnicity and multigroup dissimilarity index ( $D_m$ ).

	Model 1 <sup>a</sup>	Model 2 <sup>b</sup>	Model 3 <sup>c</sup>	Model 4 <sup>d</sup>
whites	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
per 0.10 $D_m$ , among whites	1.12 (1.10, 1.13)	1.34 (1.30, 1.38)	1.37 (1.33, 1.41)	1.00 (0.96, 1.04)
blacks relative to whites	2.31 (2.09, 2.55)	1.52 (1.37, 1.69)	1.49 (1.34, 1.65)	1.55 (1.39, 1.73)
per 0.10 $D_m$ , among blacks	0.98 (0.96, 1.00)	1.27 (1.23, 1.30)	1.29 (1.25, 1.32)	0.92 (0.88, 0.95)
Asians relative to whites	2.05 (1.84, 2.27)	1.32 (1.18, 1.47)	1.39 (1.24, 1.54)	1.22 (1.11, 1.35)
per 0.10 $D_m$ , among Asians	1.05 (1.03, 1.07)	1.33 (1.29, 1.37)	1.34 (1.30, 1.38)	0.98 (0.94, 1.02)
Hispanics relative to whites	2.00 (1.84, 2.18)	1.21 (1.08, 1.35)	1.23 (1.10, 1.37)	1.42 (1.28, 1.58)
per 0.10 $D_m$ , among Hispanics	1.06 (1.04, 1.08)	1.37 (1.32, 1.41)	1.38 (1.33, 1.42)	0.95 (0.91, 0.99)

<sup>a</sup>Model 1 contains terms for race/ethnicity, and the interaction between race/ethnicity and segregation.

<sup>b</sup>Model 1 plus Level I Omernik ecoregion; average annual rainfall (under 10", 10"-19", 20"-29", 30"-39", 40"-49", 50" and greater); and average rainfall in driest month (0", under 1", 1" to 2", 2" to 3", 3" and greater).

<sup>c</sup>Model 2 plus owner-occupied vs. rented housing units; household income under poverty, between poverty and 2x poverty, or at least twice poverty level.

<sup>d</sup>Model 2 plus block group population density (2,000-3,999/km<sup>2</sup>, 4,000-5,999/km<sup>2</sup>, 6,000-7,999/km<sup>2</sup>, 8,000-11,999/km<sup>2</sup>, 12,000/km<sup>2</sup> and higher); CBSA population size (100,000-249,999, 250,000-499,999, 500,000-999,999, 1,000,000-2,499,999, 2,500,000-4,999,999, 5,000,000 and higher).

## Figure legend

**Figure 1.** Graphical representation of method for assessing heat risk-related land cover (HRRLC) characteristics. (A) Four blocks constituting one block group. (B) National Land Cover Database tree canopy overlay. (C) National Land Cover Dataset impervious surface overlay.

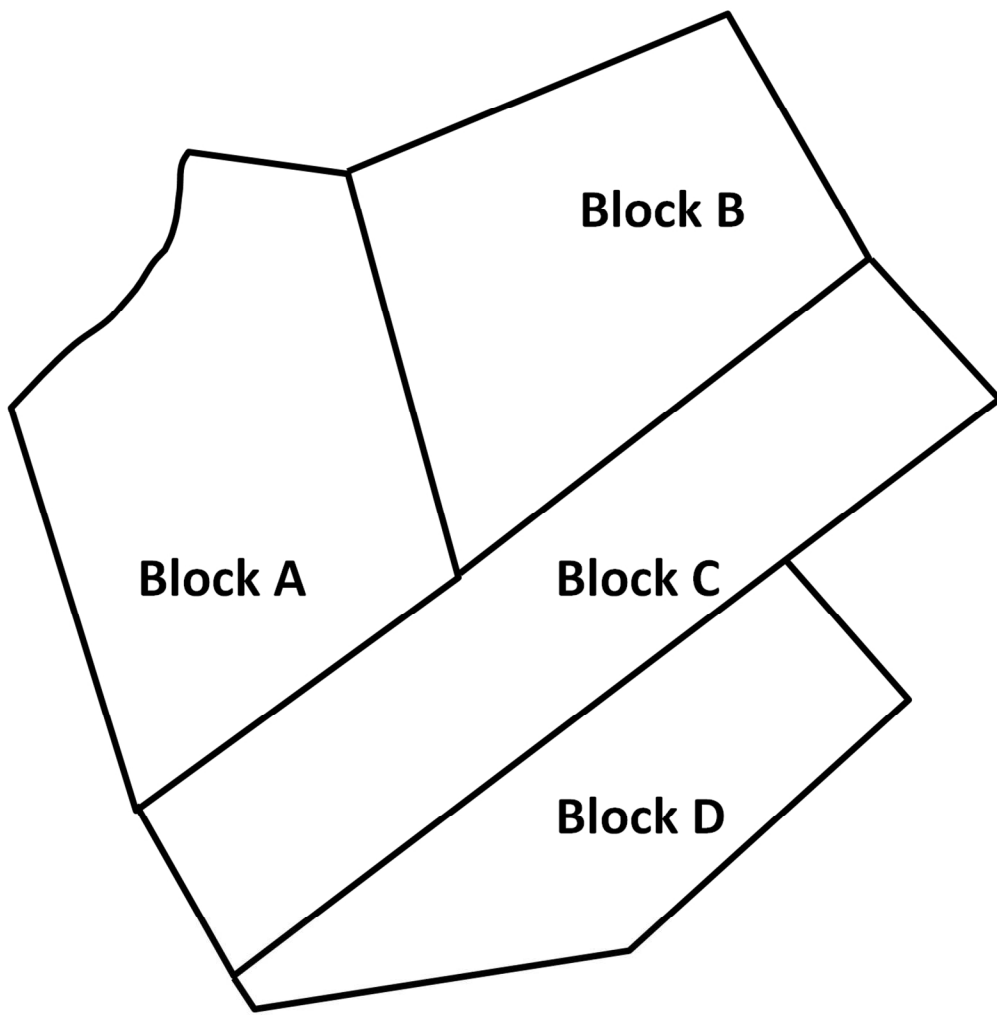


Figure 1A

368x371mm (96 x 96 DPI)





Figure 1B  
434x380mm (96 x 96 DPI)

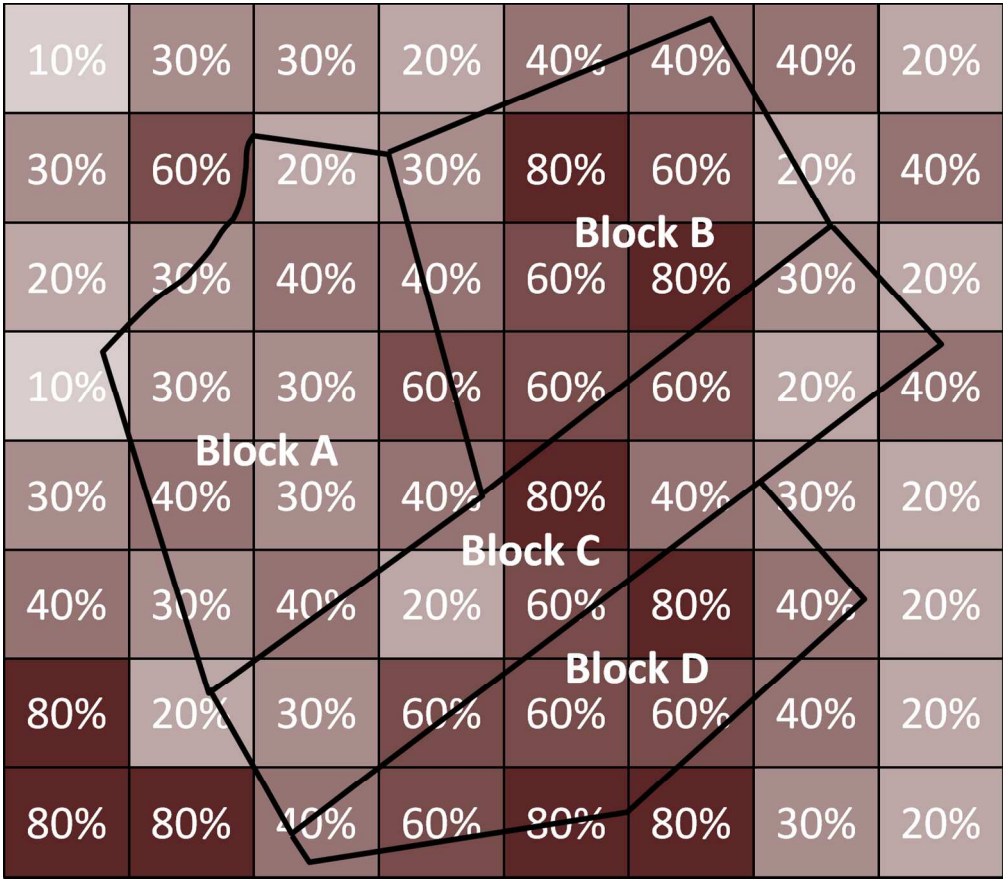


Figure 1C  
434x379mm (96 x 96 DPI)