

ANDY BEVERIDGE

Painting a Portrait of New York

By Jacquelyn Southern

To many New Yorkers, Andy Beveridge (Sociology) is a familiar name. His research on population trends in New York City and its suburbs is grist for the mill of city planners and policymakers. He writes a lively column on urban population change for the *Gotham Gazette*. On contract to the *New York Times* to analyze data and a frequent expert witness in civil rights cases, Beveridge is often in the public eye.

This trajectory was not what he had expected. Beveridge had been following the quieter path of most academic sociologists when, in 1986, “I sort of took leave of my senses,” accepting a mayoral appointment to the Yonkers school board during an acrimonious dispute over desegregation. The board was split over complying with a federal court order to desegregate. His appointment, Beveridge says, “sent a message to the board to quit playing games on the desegregation case.”

In 1988, with just a one-vote majority, Beveridge was elected president of the school board, signaling a new chapter in the Yonkers story. He served until 1990, working with community groups seeking to end the city’s opposition to the desegregation order. He also led the fight to increase teachers’ salaries and convince the board to sue New York State, which resulted in a multimillion-dollar settlement.

Mapping a Changing City

Moving from out of the archives and into a municipal struggle was a giant step for Beveridge. “For a couple of years the Yonkers issue was all-consuming. It forced me to reexamine the sort of work I do with respect to it being more immediately relevant—connecting more with people rather than doing traditional academic work.”

A tall, gregarious man with a big smile, Beveridge stands out in any crowd. He has a passion for data, reeling off metropolitan statistics the way baseball enthusiasts recite batting averages. The holder of a BA in economics and a PhD in sociology from Yale, Beveridge spent a number of years at Columbia University, conducting research at the Center for the Social Sciences. In 1981 he joined Queens College.

Shortly after he became involved with the Yonkers school board, Beveridge began to explore Geographical Information System (GIS) technology, which supports computer-assisted mapping of physical and social data. In 1992 he created new City Council districts for Yonkers that conformed with the U. S. Voting Rights Act; he recently updated these districts using the 2000 Census results.

“I’ve always been interested in social change,” Beveridge says. “I want to understand: How are things changing? What factors are causing them to change?” GIS proved an exciting way to follow population trends over time and space. Beveridge can now question large data sets in novel ways and communicate his findings in easily understood visual displays.

The result has been a growing body of work on population trends in the New York area, mapped across the region by race, ethnicity, gender, and income. Beveridge’s most widely publicized findings have included changes in traditional households, such as the increase of single-child families in Manhattan, and evidence that, with the exception of ethnically diverse western Queens, most recent immigrants to the city live in homogeneous enclaves.

Also in the news are his criticisms of the quality of Census data, which, in the rough-and-tumble world of hard politics, affect districting, the allocation of votes, and government dollars. The data, Beveridge argues, reflect outmoded techniques prone to error, which is especially evident in categories like race and household. Racial distribution has become increasingly difficult to measure as racial identifications have changed over recent years. Similarly, household data are skewed by Census guidelines that omit important social patterns, notably same-sex households.

Beveridge notes that recent studies in sociology are producing exciting findings that overturn widely held beliefs. “For example, we didn’t know that the number one reason why people go into poverty is because of household breakup—and not because of job loss, not because of problems with the labor market. Another surprising finding is that groups that try to stop behaviors like smoking or drug and alcohol use often have the perverse effect

of increasing these behaviors.”

Since 1993 Beveridge has analyzed data for the *New York Times*, an arrangement that arose when journalist Sam Roberts saw some research and maps Beveridge had produced on segregation. The *Times* featured that work on the front page of its metropolitan section. Later, Beveridge agreed to analyze data for the *Times*.

Beveridge’s expertise on segregation patterns has made him a much-sought-after expert witness in court cases. He has analyzed residential and school segregation for the U.S. Justice Department, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Westchester Legal Services, and other entities.

A Student-Friendly Office

After 22 years at Queens, Beveridge retains an upbeat outlook on the college and its students. “In a certain way the college hasn’t changed as much as people think. The students are quite good. Queens is fulfilling a role now it’s probably always fulfilled: educating students from the borough, many of whom are children of immigrants.”

From his office Beveridge fields e-mail while taking calls on his office and cell phones and speaking with students, faculty, and deans who drop in with questions. He takes pride in showing the many examples of his students’ work, from large print maps of residential segregation to an online display of neighborhood boundaries mapped over time for an exhibit at the Queens Borough Library.

Beveridge’s extensive research offers many opportunities to his students, who often are in the thick of grant-funded research at the sociology department’s Social Research Office, of which he is director. He has assembled a sophisticated GIS laboratory where he and his students produce oversized maps of population clusters that illustrate how race, income, and other social factors are distributed across the metropolitan area.

Though the windowless office is rather spartan, the students make it cheerful. Beveridge clearly enjoys working with them and relishes the collaborative research in which they are engaged. Currently, with funding from the National Science Foundation, his group is working on a project with

Professor David Halle at UCLA. Using historical Census data, maps, and other visual materials, they are developing interactive depictions of urban and rural change in the United States from 1790 to 2000. At the same time, working with the National Historical Geographical Information System project at the University of Minnesota, Beveridge is developing Census-based material showing change in major U.S. cities from 1910 through the present. Meanwhile, his more directly policy-oriented research continues. Together with faculty at the CUNY Graduate Center and Brandeis University, he is evaluating the impact of community coalitions that have targeted alcohol and drug use and abuse in 14 communities around the nation.

A Challenging Future

Beveridge worries about changes in the borough and city. Over the next 25 years, he predicts, the metropolitan area will face tough challenges, including growing racial and ethnic disparities between city and suburbs. As his work has shown in detail, white flight is redefining the urban core. "New York is *very* different now than it was, say, in 1950. In 1950 the city had about the same ethnic and racial population breakdown as the far suburbs have in 2003. New York City is now much more foreign, much more minority, much more immigrant. It's unclear to me how this will work out, and I'm concerned about it. The way the commuter tax was gotten rid of is a good example. It's very difficult to get suburbanites to send money to New York."

In his view, racial and ethnic divergence could be compounded by the trend toward higher concentrations of poverty in the city and wealth in the suburbs. The resulting income gap could become a permanent fixture, especially with the financial community and other well-paid sectors fleeing New York City. "Where I live, people used to commute to New York," he says. "Now they commute to Greenwich."

Will the trends toward greater physical distance between the rich and poor translate into political distance and indifference? During the Progressive Era, Beveridge recalls, "The argument that reformer Jacob Riis made was that it was in the 'better half's' self-interest to do something about the 'other half.' How can that work when you have the better half in Greenwich and the other half in Harlem? In 1900 they were under one municipal roof and in much closer proximity. That's the trend I'm really concerned about for New York City." **Q**



Andy Beveridge in front of one of his maps of New York City