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Rural-Urban Migration of Blacks: Past and Future

by

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Rural-Urban Migration of Blacks: Past and Future*

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After the 1920 Population Census, Congress failed for the only time in its history to reapportion the seats of the House of Representatives. When the census results were in, it was found that for the first time urban population exceeded rural in the United States. Representatives from rural States that stood to lose a seat in reapportionment argued either for an increase in the size of the House to protect their absolute representation, or else favored no reapportionment at all. The affected States were in the Midwest, New England, and the South. Thus, the issue was by no means a narrowly sectional one. But one major contributing factor was the migration of rural Southern Negroes to Northern industrial States, which the Southern congressmen insisted was only temporary.

"For the last two years," said Rep. Johnson of Mississippi, "there have been special trains carrying thousands of Negroes and a great many white people to the northern cities, and since this financial condition has come about in the country [i.e., the postwar economic recession] hundreds and thousands of these same people are trying to return to the South" [2, p. 1633]. "Thousands of (Mississippi's) citizens were temporarily employed in other sections of the country and they were not enumerated. Thousands of her citizens, mostly colored, were temporarily removed to Chicago and other places before the recent elec-

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tion to be used politically. They have been used and are now returning to their homes, poorer but wiser" [2, p. 1645]. Rep. Bee of Texas gave the ultimate assurance to the House that, "Just as certain as God reigns [the men who have gone to the cities] must go back to the farms" [2, p. 1633]. Rural partisans at times frankly admitted their objection to a reapportionment that would "...take away the strength and the power and the control of the Government from the rural districts and center it in the congested districts" [2, p. 1634].

In the end, Congress was not able to agree on any new plan and the 1910 Census continued to be used for apportionment until the election of 1932 [4, pp. 120-122]. I recount this now nearly forgotten incident in our history to remind us that rural-urban migration of blacks (or whites) is not just a recent phenomenon or one that has only in our day affected public policy. Needless to say, comparatively few of the World War I migrants ever returned to the farm for very long. Nor did the outmovement cease with the end of the war. All but one of the States that would have lost House seats in a 1920 reapportionment proceeded to lose when the 1930 Census was taken.

Although the farm population began to decline during World War I, the total white rural population continued to increase until 1940, as gains in the nonagricultural rural sectors more than offset losses from farms. The Negro rural population, however, was more highly concentrated in agriculture and 97 percent of it was in the South. When the black migration away from Southern farms began, as a result of the new

opportunities in the industrial North, the ravages of the cotton boll weevil, and the inability of eroded areas in the older plantation belt to produce cotton profitably, a decline in the total rural black population took place that has never been reversed. This population fell in fairly similar decade amounts from 7.1 million in 1910 to 6.6 million in 1940. There are no data on the actual number of black rural-urban migrants, but a defensible estimate would be a net of about 2.5 million during this 30 year period. The decline would have been heavier had not the rise in the popularity of cigarettes brought in tobacco as an alternative to cotton for many Negro farmers in the South Atlantic States, and had not the Great Depression retarded rural-urban movement in general.

With the coming of World War II, the pace of migration to the cities changed drastically for whites and blacks alike. Burgeoning defense industries provided unprecedented job opportunities, compulsory military service took many of the young men away, and in the Delta the first large scale displacements of tenant farmers through mechanization occurred. There was a brief period of return movement to farms in 1945-46, after the end of the war. However, this was just a momentary interruption in a sustained flow of people to the cities that has persisted to the present.

The majority of black farmers were cotton tenants. As the market for cotton fell and harvest mechanization came in, they were in a particularly vulnerable position. Those who were tenants had no control over their own future in farming, and mechanization -- soon augmented

by chemical weed control -- eliminated about 10 tenants for every 3 regular hired hands that it added. Black farm owners typically had farms that were far too small to yield a minimally adequate income. (Eighty-four percent of them grossed less than \$2,500 in 1959). Their average age was high, for nearly all of their grown children had left, wanting nothing to do with the occupation that they associated with the poverty of their parents.¹

In 1950, only one percent of the cotton grown in the South (excluding Texas and Oklahoma) was machine harvested. By 1959, the figure was 25 percent. By 1969, 94 percent of Southern cotton was machine harvested. The need for cotton hand labor has almost vanished. Simultaneously, acreage cutbacks and labor saving devices have reduced the number of black tenants in tobacco farming, and peanut production -- the third most important type of farming for blacks -- has been mechanized.

In sum, the last 20 years have seen the departure through displacement, voluntary withdrawal, or old age of the great majority of black farm operators. There were 560,000 of them in 1950. Today, unpublished surveys by the Economic Research Service indicate no more than 100,000 left.

The principal role of Negroes in American agriculture has changed to that of hired farmworker. More than a half million blacks still do some hired farmwork, and they perform about a fifth of all man-days of farm wage work done in this country. But a majority of these workers no longer live on farms.

From 1940 to 1960, I estimate net rural-to-urban migration of blacks was about 3 million. This left a rural black population of 5.1 million in 1960, compared with the 1910 maximum of 7.1 million. However, it is essential to note that all of the net rural decline was from the farm population. The rural-nonfarm black population increased in every decade from 1920 (when the farm-nonfarm identification was first made) to 1960, rising from 1.8 million to 2.7 million. In 1960, rural-nonfarm blacks exceeded those on farms for the first time. The steady growth of the nonfarm rural population suggests that in the future the overall rural black decline may end, as further losses from the now much-depleted farm sector become too small to offset nonfarm growth.

Data from the 1970 Census of Population are not yet available by race and residence. We know, however, from our cooperative annual surveys with the Bureau of the Census that the decline in the Negro farm population has continued to be precipitous since 1960. This population has been reduced by more than half in just 10 years, and today numbers less than 1 million. It would be impossible for future outmigration of blacks from farms to be as large as the next decade as in that just past, for there would be none remaining in another 6 or 7 years if the recent absolute losses were maintained. The recent loss from farms has been so large that I doubt that rural-nonfarm gains have yet fully offset it. Census returns from the 158 nonmetropolitan counties in the Nation in which Negroes comprised a majority of the rural population in 1960 show a mean decline of 6 percent in the total population of these counties from 1960-70.

91 What of the characteristics of the migrants who left the rural areas?

The proportion of rural blacks who have gone to urban areas in the last generation is so high that it includes large numbers of all segments of the population. Based on our cooperative research with James Tarver for the 1950-60 period, I estimate that the 25-29 year old cohort of Negroes living in rural counties in 1960 represented little more than a third of the original group of that age who were born in those counties. It is the population remaining behind in the rural environment that is more likely to be of selective composition than that which has left.

Recently, new information has become available on the cumulative extent of rural-urban migration and on characteristics of the migrants. This is the data file from the Survey of Economic Opportunity, collected for the Office of Economic Opportunity by the Bureau of the Census in February 1967. In this 30,000 household national sample, data were obtained on the previous residence history of the population and related to current residence and characteristics. Migration was defined as a move of at least 50 miles distance. Tabulations compare current residence with that at age 16. Using this definition of migration, which I regard as reasonably conservative, there were 9,096,000 urban blacks 17 years old and over in 1967, of whom 2,056,000 or, 22.6 percent, were of rural migrant origin. This number of rural-urban migrants is much smaller than the sum of the decade numbers cited earlier, but it must be remembered that it relates only to persons still living, excludes children under 17, and treats as nonmigrants persons whose rural-urban move was less than 50 miles.

Of the rural-urban black migrants, 3/4 were living in the central cities of metropolitan areas. Only 12 percent had gone to nonmetropolitan urban places, compared with 25 percent of white rural-urban migrants.

Among urban blacks 50 years old and over, a third were of rural migrant origin. This proportion dropped to 14 percent at ages 17-29, where much of the potential movement had yet to take place. But in view of the large number of urban-born blacks at this age group, it is unlikely that the percentage of rural migrant people will ever be as large in this cohort in the future as it is among persons presently of middle or older age.

Fully half of the black rural-urban migration has involved an interregional move from the South to the North or West. In this characteristic, the black rural-urban migrants were far different from the white migrants, only 1/10 of whom had moved interregionally from the South to the rest of the country.

Educationally, the rural-urban black migrants were intermediate between city natives and rural residents. Twenty-six percent of them were high school graduates, compared with 16 percent of the rural residents and 39 percent of the urban natives. Some of the educational disadvantage as compared with urban natives was the product of the older average age of the migrants. When the population was grouped into three age ranges -- 17-29, 30-49, and 50 and over -- the differential between rural-urban migrants and urban natives was found only above age 30. At ages 17-29, the median attainment of the two groups and the proportion

completing high school were essentially identical. But this means that the differential between the rural-urban migrants and rural non-migrants has widened. In past years, so few rural Negroes had obtained high school training that there was no possibility for extensive out-migration without drawing heavily from the poorly educated. In more recent years, improvements in rural education have produced more differentiation in that population in level of schooling, and the selectivity of outmigration by education seems to have increased. Among blacks of rural origin 17-29 years old in 1967, about 1/2 of those who were high school graduates had moved to cities, whereas only 1/6 of those who had 8 years of less of school had done so. At all age groups, the higher the amount of schooling, the higher the proportion who had moved to the city. To a partial but unknown extent some of the higher education of the migrants results from education they obtained after their move to the city. The intermediate level of education of rural-urban black migrants has served to lower the average level of education in both the black population of origin and the area of destination.

In economic activity, black rural-urban migrant men compared as follows with their urban-reared neighbors. The migrants were just as likely to have had some employment in the preceding year. (No measure of current unemployment was taken). If employed, they were somewhat more likely to have had full-time work (50-52 weeks), and less likely to have "white collar" jobs or to work in the industries in which such jobs are most common, such as trade, public administration, or professional services. Their most common work was as operatives in manufacturing industries.

Despite some overall disadvantage in education and job structure, black urban families headed by a migrant of rural origin did not experience lower average income than other black urban families. Their median (in 1966) was \$5,116 compared with \$5,105 for the families with urban native heads. A factor acting to produce this parity of income, was the more normal composition of the rural migrant families. Seventy-four percent of them had a male head, compared with 69 percent male heads among the urban native families. Male headed families had double the average income that families with female heads had. When families are considered separately by sex of head, the urban native families headed by men averaged about \$300 more in median income than did the comparable rural migrant families. A similar difference was indicated for families headed by women, but was not statistically reliable.

Among persons living alone or with nonrelatives -- the group called unrelated individuals in census data -- the rural-urban migrant group averaged somewhat less income than did urban natives. The income superiority of the urban natives among unrelated individuals held for both men and women.

When the income data were related to age and family size, the following picture of the incidence of poverty appeared, using the standard federal poverty definitions. Of rural-urban black migrants 17 years old and over, 26.6 percent were in poverty, compared with 26.9 percent of the black urban population of urban origin. In other words, the incidence of income poverty among the two populations was almost identical. Black urban residents of rural origin are not more likely

to be poor. This overall identity is not the chance product of any systematic pattern of internally higher poverty incidence among the migrants that is masked in the aggregate by structural differences in the two populations.

Needless to say, the black rural-urban migrants have a higher incidence of poverty than do their white counterparts, of whom 1/10 were in poverty. But it is only among whites, that rural-urban migrants show a consistently greater amount of poverty than do urban natives. (The difference among whites is not a major one -- 10.1 percent against 7.4 percent -- but is consistent when further classified by age, marital status, education, occupation and other variables.)

Despite the fact that a fourth of rural-urban black migrants were in poverty in 1966, their migration seems to have been effective in greatly reducing the level of poverty over that prevailing in rural areas. Of the black population still in rural areas, 57.7 percent -- more than double the urban proportion -- were in poverty. The median income of rural black families (\$2,778) was little more than half that of urban families of rural origin.

The Survey of Economic Opportunity also contains the first national information on receipt of money income from public welfare programs, by migration status. In February 1967, there were in the black urban population, 151,000 families and 58,000 individuals of rural-urban migrant status who had received some income from public welfare sources in the preceding year. They accounted for 11 percent of all urban families receiving such assistance and 9 percent of the individuals who

did so. Among blacks, the rural-urban migrant family or individual was nominally slightly more likely than urban natives to have received welfare income assistance. Such income was received by 17.3 percent of the migrant families and 15.6 percent of the urban natives, and 17.6 percent of the unrelated individual migrants and 14.4 percent of the urban natives. However, these differences are not statistically significant from a sampling standpoint, and if real would be rather minor in any meaningful effect on welfare programs.

The effective impact of black rural-urban migrants on urban welfare caseloads lies in the low average income levels and higher assistance needs of blacks in general, and not in any differential propensity of migrants to need or obtain welfare money. Rural-urban black migrant families were somewhat less likely to have received welfare money than were blacks still living in rural areas. In equity, the frequency of welfare assistance should have been much greater for rural blacks than it was, in view of their very low average income. But in rural areas only 28 percent of the black families in poverty reported having any public welfare income. Black families of rural origin in the city, were less likely to need welfare assistance than their rural cousins, but were more likely to get it when in poverty (42 percent), and received substantially higher average payments.

One major difference between rural-urban black migrants and the population that has remained in rural areas is the rate of childbearing. The number of children ever born per 1000 rural-urban migrant black women 35-44 years old was 3360. This is more than 30 percent lower than the childbearing rate of 4937 children per 1000 black women of the same age who still lived in rural areas. We cannot say how much of the

difference is the result of selectivity of migrants at the time of move and how much results from lowered fertility after moving to the urban setting. In any case, the lowered childbearing of rural-urban migrants is an important factor in their much lower rate of poverty compared with the rural population, for heavy child dependency is a major feature of Negro poverty. To what, I confess, is my own surprise, the fertility of rural-urban black migrants proved to be no higher than that of urban natives (3470/1000). I do not believe we have previously been fully aware of the magnitude of fertility selection and/or reduction associated with black rural-urban movement.

A final point that I want to make in this discussion of the characteristics and fortunes of the migrants concerns differences in status by decade of migration. The incidence of poverty for rural-urban migrants who were 30-49 years old in 1967, has been tabulated by the decade in which they made their rural-urban move. Naturally, those who had moved earlier would have had more years in which to adjust to the urban environment and advance their incomes. They would also tend to be somewhat older than the more recent migrants, within the age-span limits used. Among black migrants there was no consistent pattern or meaningful difference in the incidence of poverty among those who had moved before 1940, in the 1940's, in the 1950's or after 1960. The poverty rate was 21.8 percent among those who moved in the 1960's and 18.6 percent among those who moved before 1940. In striking contrast, the incidence of poverty among white rural-urban migrants was strongly associated with decade of move. A phenomenally

low 1.0 percent rate of poverty was found among whites who moved to the city before 1940. The rate rose progressively for those moving in succeeding decades to a high of 8.5 percent for the migrants who came in the 1960's.

The general picture that emerges from the Survey of Economic Opportunity material is that black rural-urban migrants, despite a distinct educational disadvantage until recent years, have succeeded in earning average family incomes nearly the equal of that of black urban natives and in doing so have avoided any incidence of poverty disproportionate to that of other urban blacks. Nor do they appear to have any but a marginally greater reliance on welfare income. I doubt that these findings conform to the general stereotype of the economic status of black rural migrants especially those who have come to Northern and Western cities from the South. Furthermore, on any available scale of comparison, their economic and educational status is far superior to that of blacks still living in rural areas. It is well to reiterate, however, that the black rural-urban migrants are far more afflicted with poverty in the cities than are their white counterparts.

The impact of future rural-urban migration of blacks is conditioned by the fact that not more than 1/4 of the total black population (at the most) now resides in rural areas, compared with better than 1/2 in 1940 when the large-scale movement began. The great majority of Negro youth are city-born today. In the future, rural-urban migrants will not comprise as high a proportion of the urban population as they have in the recent past. Nor will their absolute numbers be as large,

for the rural base population is smaller, particularly the farm population from which so many people have come. In addition, nonfarm rural employment is supporting larger numbers of blacks than it has in the past.

On the other hand, these considerations do not imply that rural-urban outmigration of blacks is over. Several factors insure its continuance in the near future: (1) The fertility of the rural population is still very high in modern terms. The present Negro rural population bears enough children to more than double its size in every generation. This creates a potential labor force growth rate that in most areas far exceeds the capacity of the economy to match it with new jobs, and thus leads to outmigration. (2) Negro rural youth have a positive preference to live in urban areas. A recent study of rural high school youth in three East Texas counties showed that 63 percent of the Negro students wanted to live in a large city. The figure for white youth was only 16 percent [3]. A Florida study showed similar results [5]. The economic status and opportunities of rural blacks are still so inferior to that of the urban population -- despite some improvement of rural conditions -- that urban areas continue to exert a strong pull for people motivated to improvement of their status.

Beyond these generalizations, it is difficult to go, at this time. When the 1970 Census results are in, and we can see what changes have occurred in the size and composition of the black rural population, we will be in a better position to judge the probable extent and nature of the future flow. There is no question that the vast rural-urban movement

after 1940 was the major source of the rapid growth of black urban population. As such, it was a major contributor to those urban problems associated with black growth and congestion per se, but was probably not critical to the changed politico-cultural mood and stance of the urban black population.

Most of the current further increase of the urban population is coming from natural increase rather than migration. This point is becoming publicly understood, as is the fact that black urban residents of rural origin were not disproportionately represented in the major riots of late years that stimulated so much belated interest in migration. The period when policy support for programs to benefit rural blacks -- and thus perhaps retard migration -- could be obtained from urban sources on a self-interest basis was rather brief in its life span. Cutbacks in rural-urban movement now -- when the supply of migrants has been somewhat depleted -- would be unlikely to have major beneficial effects on efforts to relieve urban congestion or otherwise improve the conditions of urban life.

Footnotes

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¹ For a general discussion of the characteristics of Negro farmers and factors affecting their numbers, see [1].

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Abstract

Rural-Urban Migration of Blacks: Past and Future

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The history of rural-urban migration of blacks since World War I is reviewed. Data for 1967 showed about 23 percent of the adult U.S. urban black population to be migrants of rural childhood background. They had lower average education, compared with urban natives, but did not show lower average family income or higher incidence of poverty. The rural-urban black migrants had only a nominally higher reliance on public welfare income than did the urban natives. The migrants were far superior to the black population still in rural areas in education and income. Future rural-urban migration is expected to be less than that in the recent past.