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THE GREAT MIGRATION OF BLACK AMERICANS FROM THE US SOUTH:
A GUIDE AND INTERPRETATION

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ABSTRACT

The Great Migration from the US South is a prominent theme in economic history research not only because it was a prime example of large scale internal migration, but also because it had far-reaching ramifications for American economic, social, and political change. This essay offers a concise review of the literature focused on questions of timing, selection, and migrants' outcomes, and then offers a more speculative interpretation of how the Great Migration fostered the advancement of Civil Rights.

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1. Introduction

Between 1910 and 1970, several million black Americans migrated from the South in what is now known as "the Great Migration." This resulted in a large-scale redistribution of the black population—nearly 90 percent of black Americans lived in the South in 1910, but by 1970, less than half did. Over the same 60-year period, the black share of residents in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, some of the main destinations for black migrants, increased from approximately 3 percent to 26 percent.[1]

Although the Great Migration ended 50 years ago, it has remained a prominent research topic in economics and other social sciences. Among many recent publications and working papers, see Alexander et al. (2017); Black et al. (2015); Boustan (2017); Calderon et al. (2019); Collins and Wanamaker (2014, 2015); Derenoncourt (2019); Tabellini (2019); and Leibbrand et al. (2020). It has also been the subject of best-selling books, such as Nicholas Lehmann's *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991) and Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (2010), which interpret the Great Migration through the experiences of specific individuals, families, and places.

A key theme in this literature (and this essay) is that the Great Migration is an important subject not only because it is a prime example of internal migration—thereby useful for testing economic models of selection, networks, information, and so on—but more importantly, because it has had deep and long-lasting ramifications for American society. The Great Migration provides a window on the interaction of race, economics, and politics in America's past, present, and future. Its story helps to connect the dots between historical and modern racial inequality in the United States, from the rural post-Civil War South to the urban post-World War II North and West. This is what draws most scholars to study the Great Migration—it is hard to understand the modern United States without some appreciation for how the Great Migration transformed it.

In this paper, I review some of the literature's major questions and answers about the Great Migration, many of which are grounded in micro-econometric approaches to the study of migration and cities. New data sources and techniques have repeatedly opened the way for re-examination and deeper dives into these questions. Then, I widen the essay's scope to pose questions about the broader course of American history and politics. In particular, I discuss the Great Migration's connections and contributions to the Civil Rights Movement, which I suggest are an important but underappreciated legacy.

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[1] Black shares calculated with the 1-percent 1910 IPUMS sample (Ruggles et al. 2015) and the 1972 City Data Book file from ICPSR Study 2896 (Haines and ICPSR 2010)

2. Facts and Figures

For perspective on the magnitude of the Great Migration, Figure 1 shows the share of the southern-born black population residing outside of the South, plotted separately for ten-year birth cohorts observed at ten-year census intervals. The figure is built from repeated cross-sections of the IPUMS microdata samples of Census of Population data (Ruggles et al. 2015), relying on variables for state of birth, state of residence, and age (converted to birth cohort).[2]

After 1910, large shares of each cohort relocated outside the South. The 1900-10 birth cohort, for instance, increased their non-southern residence during the 1920s by about 15 percentage points; by 1950, 36 percent of this cohort lived outside the South. For the 1920-30 birth cohort, the changes were even more stark, with a 23 percentage point jump in the 1940s and a 44 percent share outside the South by 1980.[3] After 1970, the outflow of migrants was much reduced, such that the 1950s birth cohort had the lowest outmigration rate of any group since the 1880s cohort. The conventional view is that the Great Migration ended in 1970s as black migration from the South declined, black migration to the South increased (Long and Hansen 1975; Adelman et al. 2000; Hunt et al. 2008), and much of the South prospered in the wake of the Civil Rights revolution (Wright 2013).

Figure 2 shows the pre- and post-Great Migration distribution of the US-born black population by state. The states are grouped by region along the horizontal axis. The geographic concentration of the black population in southern states in 1910 stands out (shown in black bars). By 1970, the share of the black population had declined in every southern state, with the exception of Maryland and Florida, and it had increased dramatically in New York, Illinois, and California. In fact, the black population in New York was larger than in any single southern state by 1970.[4] A dissimilarity index that summarizes differences in the white and black population distributions over states indicates a sharp decline between 1910 and 1970, from approximately 0.65 to 0.28, but even so, the black population remained quite differently distributed over states (and within states) than the

[2] There is some age heaping in the black population, especially for those born in the nineteenth century, which could lead to some misclassification into birth cohorts. Re-centering cohort definitions (e.g., grouping 35-44 year olds rather than 30-39 year olds) results in a picture that is visually similar to Figure 1 (e.g., peaking at over 40 percent for some cohorts in census years 1960 to 1990).

[3] For perspective, the maximum share for southern-born white cohorts residing outside the South was only 23 percent (for the 1920s birth cohort observed in 1960).

[4] This reflects black migrants and their descendants as well as a non-trivial black population that was already present in 1910.

white population.[5] This implies that economic shocks and trends that varied over space likely had substantially different implications for black and white workers.

Figure 3A reports occupational distributions in 1930 and 1960 for black migrants and three comparison groups: black men who remained in the South, black men who were born and resided in the North (and West), and white men who were born and resided in the North (and West). The first large wave of the Great Migration ended circa 1930 with the onset of the Great Depression. The next large wave came during the 1940s and 1950s and should be reflected in the outcomes observed in 1960. In 1930, the most striking differences are that northern black men, including migrants, rarely worked in agriculture, whereas agriculture was the modal sector for southern black men; black migrants had roughly similar occupations to northern black non-migrants, but migrants were less likely to be in white collar work and more likely to be unskilled laborers; and black men in the North (both migrant and non-migrant) had substantially lower occupational status than white men (less white-collar work and less skilled blue-collar work). In 1960, northern black men had reduced their share of employment as unskilled labor and increased their share in operative, craft, and white-collar employment compared to 1930, but they still lagged far behind northern white men in professional and managerial work and were much more likely than white men to work in service (household and non-household combined) and unskilled labor.[6] Another important trend is that a sizable share of black men, ages 25-54, in each group in 1960 was not in the labor force.[7]

Figure 3B reports occupational distributions for women in 1930 and 1960 for the same comparison groups. Black women in the North in the 1930, both migrant and non-migrant, were much more likely than white women to be in the labor force and were much more likely to work in household and non-household service. By 1960, differences in labor force participation had narrowed somewhat, but where white women were primarily concentrated in clerical and sales (if in the labor force), black women were still primarily in service occupations. Notably, northern-born

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[5] The dissimilarity index ranges between 0 and 1 and represents the share of the white or black population that would have to move across state lines to equalize the white and black distributions (Duncan 1955). At the county level, the dissimilarity indices are higher (approximately 0.70 in 1910 and 0.47 in 1970); the relatively high 1970 figure reflects the uneven distribution of the black population across counties in the North and West. These were calculated using county data from Haines and ICPSR Study 2896, excluding Alaska and Hawaii. Within metropolitan areas, black-white residential segregation increased sharply during the Great Migration (Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor 1999). See also Logan and Parman (2017). This issue is taken up later in the paper.

[6] In a sample of 40-49 year old men in 1950, the ratio of southern-born black over non-southern born white annual income is 0.67 (including only those with positive income and using sample line weights.)

[7] Note that the “labor force” concept and its derivation from census questions was not the same in 1930 and 1960. See the IPUMS documentation on the *labforce* variable at https://usa.ipums.org/usa-action/variables/LABFORCE#comparability_section.

black women in 1960 (many of whom would have been children of the earlier wave migrants) were substantially more likely than migrants to have made inroads in professional and clerical and sales work.[8]

In sum, while their occupational and earnings prospects were, on average, better in the North than in the South, it is also clear that *within* the North, black migrants were a relatively low-paid segment of the labor force during the Great Migration. Of course, variation around the mean is interesting and important, too. Figure 4 provides a rough depiction of black men's annual earnings in 1949, based on the 1950 census microdata. Men who worked as farmers and farm laborers are dropped from the sample here because it is difficult to assess their in-kind income. This drops some of the poorest southern black men from the sample.[9] Even so, the distribution of southern black men's earnings is far to the left relative to that of southern-born black men in the North or West (migrants), whose distribution in turn is far to the left of northern white distribution.

3. Survey: Progress and possibilities for research

The century-long and multi-disciplinary literature on the Great Migration cannot be fully reviewed in the space of one essay. I will focus primarily on work in economics and economic history, but I will also try to incorporate references to relevant branches of research in sociology and history.[10] The goal is to provide readers with a sense of how research has developed over time and how it has responded to opportunities in the form of new data and methods.

Fundamental questions regarding the timing of the Great Migration's onset; the migrants' selection, choices of destination, and earnings gains; and the migrants' impact on the employment, wages, and housing markets in receiving and sending areas have been engaged by scholars from the very beginning (see for example, Donald 1921). Scholars have made progress in all of these areas, but data shortcomings and common challenges of interpretation (e.g., making causal inferences from observational data) have always meant that there is more to learn and, potentially, better answers on the horizon.

3.1 The beginning

Given large regional differences in observed wages and income per capita in the post Civil

[8] For longer-run views of black women's labor market outcomes, see Jones (1985), Sundstrom (2000), Bailey and Collins (2004), Boustan and Collins (2014), and Collins and Moody (2017).

[9] In addition to in-kind income, regional differences in cost of living complicate comparisons of census reported income, especially since housing characteristics are so different across regions historically.

[10] See Tolnay (2003) for an earlier review and discussion of research on the Great Migration.

War era (Easterlin 1960, Margo 2004), a basic question about the Great Migration is why it began in the 1910s, rather than several decades before. At the conclusion of the Civil War, most black southerners were former slaves. There was no large-scale redistribution of land or compensation granted to former slaves; therefore, most black southerners circa 1865 possessed no capital, land, or formal education. It may appear that black southerners had little incentive to stay in the South, and the post-Reconstruction ascendancy of white political power, violence against the black population, and disenfranchisement should have made staying even less attractive.[11] In practice, however, poor and predominantly agricultural populations are often slow to engage in long-distance migration, especially when they lack extensive networks of contacts in potential destinations (Spitzer and Zimran 2019). In this case, one could argue that the South's labor market was comparatively isolated and disconnected from the North circa 1865 (Wright 1986, ch. 3; Rosenbloom 2002), whereas the North's labor market was already tightly integrated with Europe's, as evidenced by the migration of approximately 30 million Europeans in the "Age of Mass Migration" (Hatton and Williamson 1998, Abramitzky and Boustan 2017). Under the circumstances, northern employers had little demand for black workers and apparently favored white workers, including European immigrants, when they were available (Collins 1997).[12] In the nineteenth century, migration to the North may have been costly and risky for most black southerners, at least in comparison to conditions that prevailed later.

An alternative, but not mutually exclusive, interpretation would emphasize the determination of post-Civil War black families to acquire land in the South by working their way up the agricultural ladder. Indeed, black southerners accumulated property and literacy at substantial rates in the decades after the Civil War (Higgs 1982, Margo 1984, Williams 2005, Collins and Margo 2006, 2011), a testament to their resolve to build a better life for themselves and their children. Such advances in wealth and human capital, although still far behind white levels on average, might have helped set the stage for the Great Migration by loosening the constraints of poverty and illiteracy on migration (Margo 1990, ch. 7). But the initiation of the Great Migration apparently required more than just the existence of large regional wage differences and gradual increases in southern black wealth and literacy. The onset coincided with an increase in industrial production during World War I and the simultaneous decline in immigration from Europe. Most US industrial centers were in the

[11] Models of locational choice (e.g., Sjaastad 1962, Roback 1982) help clarify the economics of migration decisions, including the role of factors other than wages in determining the relative attractiveness of locations.
[12] A notable exception is that black workers were recruited for breaking strikes (Whatley 1993).

North, and their demand for labor was met in part by southern migrants, many of whom were black.[13] This timing has anchored the conventional wisdom that the war's positive shock to industrial labor demand and simultaneous negative shock to European immigrant labor supply spurred the first wave of large-scale migration from the South (Thomas 1954, Collins 1997). Even before the returns from the 1920 census schedules were tabulated, it was clear to scholars and many other observers that black men and women were leaving the South at an unprecedented pace. Carter G. Woodson, for instance, concluded his history of black migration, published in 1918, with a chapter titled "Exodus," which focused on the recent surge of out-migration.[14]

Three aspects of the early stages of the Great Migration led to self-sustaining migration flows from the South after World War I. First, as Whatley (1990) shows with data from Cincinnati, some northern firms gained their first experience employing black workers, and this appears to have facilitated future hiring. Second, migrants supplied information and assistance to relatives and friends who remained in the South, which reduced the costs and uncertainty of migration (inter alia, Marks 1989, Carrington et al. 1996, Stuart and Taylor 2019). Third, northern black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, began to circulate widely in the South, and they conveyed useful information and encouraged migration (Grossman 1989, ch. 3). In addition to these self-perpetuating features of migration, negative shocks to southern agriculture, most famously the boll weevil and the New Deal's AAA program, may have loosened black workers' attachment to the region and increased migration.[15] Higgs (1976) argues that the boll weevil was neither necessary nor sufficient to drive the Great Migration, though it may have mattered for certain places in the 1920s (see also Lewis 1931). In any case, black migration from the South during the 1920s, long after the demand spike associated with World War I had passed, far exceeded black migration during the 1910s (Eldridge and Thomas 1964, table 1.27).

To be clear, it is well understood that racial discrimination was widespread in the North and West before, during, and after the beginning of the Great Migration. This had important and detrimental implications for the jobs black workers were able to secure (Du Bois 1899; Myrdal 1944; Foote, Whatley, and Wright 2003), the unemployment rates they would endure (Sundstrom 1992), the neighborhoods in which they resided (Abrams 1955, Meyer 2000), and ultimately the families

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[13] A large number of white southerners migrated during this period, as well (Collins and Wanamaker 2015). Although the number of white migrants was large in absolute terms, their migration rate (relative to population) was lower than that of the black population.
[14] See also early publications by Scroggs (1917) and the US Department of Labor (1919).
[15] See Whatley (1983) on the New Deal. See Day (1967) and Grove and Heinicke (2003) on mechanization in later decades.

and futures they built. But it is also clear that the scope for black Americans' economic, educational, and political advance was greater in the North and West than in the South, a theme I return to later in the paper.

The story above is a very brief summary of a rich and continually evolving literature. New data sources and technologies may add considerable depth to our understanding of the pre- and early Great Migration eras. For instance, early twentieth-century complete count census records can provide detailed views of black communities in northern cities just before and after the start of the Great Migration (Shertzer et al. 2016, Shertzer and Walsh 2019), or of the southern communities from which migrants departed. Improvements in GIS renderings of the transportation system may be better integrated with the history of internal migration (Atack 2013, Black et al. 2015). Micro-level data from many sources may be linked over time, mapped, or combined with other data sources (e.g., vital records, political outcomes, public goods, tax records) to clarify our view of "the beginning" of the Great Migration and to open up new questions about its timing and consequences. For example, for the pre-Great Migration period, Logan (2009) analyzes the migration patterns of black Civil War veterans, whose military and census records are linked in the US Colored Troops sample (Fogel et al. 2004). He finds that health shocks during the war influenced veterans' likelihood of migration up to 1900, a result that could have broader implications for understanding black migration patterns in the late nineteenth century and beyond.

3.2 The migrants: selection, gains, and losses

Scholars and commentators immediately recognized that documenting the characteristics of southern migrants was essential to understanding the migration's implications for both the sending and receiving regions. The early literature was limited, however, by the aggregate nature of census data reported in published census volumes. One of the great benefits of microdata samples that became available after 1960 is that scholars could more carefully compare migrants and non-migrants either in the place from which they departed or the place to which they moved. In cross-sectional data with birthplace information, inter-regional migrants are typically defined as those born in the South but living elsewhere (as in Figure 1). To my knowledge, these micro-level comparisons were first featured in a literature motivated by concentrated poverty in northern cities in the 1960s. For instance, studies by Masters (1972) and Weiss and Williamson (1972) focus on comparisons of labor market outcomes for southern-born black workers residing in northern or western cities with

non-southern-born black workers in those same places.[16] The idea was to see whether southern migrants to the North were disproportionately poor; if so, it might imply that the economic plight of northern black families circa 1970 was rooted directly in the poverty of the South and transmitted by migration.[17] However, the microdata revealed that black migrants fared at least as well as, if not better than, northern-born black workers on most dimensions of labor market outcomes even though they had lower levels of educational attainment. Positive selection into migration on "unobservables" (e.g., motivation, health, skills not reflected in educational attainment) might well account for this finding. But in any case, it was clear that the economic and social problems of American ghettos, which motivated much of this research, were not simply an urban manifestation of transplanted southern poverty. Boustan (2009, 2010) and Derenoncourt (2019), which I discuss in more detail later, pick up this thread of investigation on how migrants fared in the North and, importantly, how things changed in the North in response to the migrants' arrival.

Margo's examination of education and propensity for migration (1990, ch. 7) is an important early study in the microdata-based literature on the Great Migration. He uses micro-level data from the 1900, 1910, 1940, and 1950 "public use tapes." These were relatively small but nationally representative samples of cross-sectional census data, the precursors to the IPUMS samples. Like the studies mentioned above, the microdata allowed close comparisons between migrants and non-migrants. Margo shows that better educated southern-born black men were more likely to move to the North than others, even after controlling for observables such as age, marital status, and family size (table 7.3). His interpretation emphasizes the importance of "supply-side" constraints on black migration—specifically, the constraints imposed by low levels of literacy within the black population in the late nineteenth century, which were reinforced and perpetuated by a discriminatory education system. Advances in educational attainment from one generation to the next, therefore, helped support an increasing tide of black outmigration even if the post-1910 surge of the Great Migration still required an exogenous shock (p. 117). Margo's work presaged a new wave of research on the Great Migration that would draw heavily on microdata sources.[18] The dissemination of the IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 1995), which harmonized historical public use microdata from the US census and made samples available for convenient and free downloading, combined with rapid increases in

[16] Weiss and Williamson (1972), for example, studied the Survey of Economic Opportunities, taken circa 1967, and Masters (1972) studied the 1/1000 sample of the 1960 census. Long and Heltman (1975) and Lieberson (1978), among others, also address this question, albeit without microdata.
[17] For instance, Masters asks, "How many of the problems facing northern (or urban) Negroes can be attributed directly to their migration from the South (or from rural areas)?" (1972, p. 412).
[18] Among many others that rely heavily on samples of IPUMS data, see for example Tolnay (1998), Vigdor (2002), and Curtis White (2005).

desktop computing power, greatly increased scholars' ability to analyze detailed data pertaining to the Great Migration.

A key shortcoming of the IPUMS data is their cross-sectional nature—one cannot observe the same person at two points in time, which obscures information that would be helpful in understanding the population's selection into migration and workers' labor market gains from migrating. There is some traction to be gained from using state of birth and year of birth information in the cross-sectional data, but of course this leaves open the questions of when any given migrant actually moved (e.g., as a child or adult, before or after completing their schooling, and so on), the environment from which they departed (e.g., rural or urban; cotton-intensive or not), and what they were doing before their departure (e.g., farm or non-farm employment).

The value of longitudinal datasets for the study of migration is clear, but until recently such data were scarce for the Great Migration era.[19] For instance, the NLSY and PSID—workhorse longitudinal datasets for social scientists—commenced in the late 1960s, when the Great Migration was at or near its end. New data sources and methods allowed Collins and Wanamaker (2014) to overcome this problem by linking census records over time in the early twentieth century. Specifically, we linked males who resided in the South in 1910 forward in time to the 1930 census manuscripts (searched via Ancestry.com and then transcribed) to study selection into migration and to measure the migrants' gains.[20] We find evidence of positive selection into migration in that migrants were somewhat better off than non-migrants even before leaving the South, though the difference on average was not very large; therefore, we emphasize the broad-based nature of the Great Migration over this period. It is possible, of course, that patterns of migrant selection were different and more positively skewed before World War I (and perhaps in the interwar period), reflecting the nature of migration costs, differential responses to southern oppression, and variation over time in northern labor demand for unskilled labor.[21] A strong interpretation of the early decades of the Great Migration in terms of the Roy model (Roy 1951, Borjas 1987) is difficult due to the scarcity of data on race-specific income distributions and skill differentials. Collins and Wanamaker

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[19] Maloney (2001) demonstrated some of the promise of longitudinal records for studying the Great Migration based on linking 1920 census records and World War I registration data to study occupational mobility in Cincinnati. Also, see Bodnar et al. (1982) on Pittsburgh and Logan (2009) on black Civil War veterans.
[20] Linking women is difficult due to name changes at marriage, hence our focus on men. The possibilities and technologies for census data linkage have changed rapidly since the early 2010s. The full count census manuscripts with names are now available up to 1940 for researchers with approved projects and access to the data. Systematically searching and transcribing Ancestry.com's census of population records is no longer necessary or feasible.
[21] Vigdor (2002) takes up some of these issues using cross-sectional data.

(2014, pp. 225 and 242-243) offer some discussion, suggesting that positively selected black migration is not consistent with a simple version of the Roy model but may be consistent with richer versions of the model that incorporate differential migration costs across skill groups, or differential valuation of northern amenities. Readers interested in this line of investigation should also see Vigdor (2002).

Collins and Wanamaker (2014) also estimate large earnings gains for migrants, reflecting both changes in occupations (a tendency to move into higher paying jobs) and changes in locations (within occupations, northern pay was higher than southern).[22] There is no random assignment into migration, but we do measure the gains from several different perspectives (comparisons of men from the same county, from the same household, or "within person" changes in earnings for men in the labor force in both 1910 and 1930), all of which point toward large earnings gains. Finally, we use those earnings gains to estimate the change in the black-white earnings score ratio from 1910 to 1930 that might be attributable to migration. We conclude that in absence of the Great Migration, the black-white earnings ratio might have fallen rather than risen slightly.

Although work specifically focused on health and the Great Migration is relatively new, evidence is building that participants in the Great Migration paid a price in terms of their health outcomes. In historical settings, it is not uncommon for migrants to large cities to experience worse health outcomes than those remaining in rural areas (Haines 2001), but for the overall US population, these rural-urban mortality gaps had closed by the time of the Great Migration. The evidence of negative health consequences for black migrants is important because racial disparities in health are a fundamental part of disparities in overall wellbeing.[23] Eriksson and Niemesh (2016) show that black infant mortality rates increased due to migration to northern cities, at least prior to 1940. For later cohorts who migrated from the deep South, Black et al. (2015) show that longevity declined in the Duke SSA/Medicare dataset, which covers people over age 65 in 1976 to 2001 and includes detailed birthplace and time of death information. A key innovation in this paper is to use proximity to railways in the early twentieth century as an instrumental variable for migration to attempt to circumvent the bias associated with selective migration. Their IV estimates indicate that migrants, conditional on living to age 65, were about 10 percentage points less likely to survive to age 75 than

[22] A perennial challenge to working with historical data on labor market outcomes is that individual-level earnings are not reported in the census, hence our reliance on occupation, race, and location to impute "earnings scores." See Collins and Wanamaker (2014) for a detailed discussion in this context. See Inwood, Minns, and Summerfield (2019) and Saavedra and Twinam (2020) for more general discussions of the issue.
[23] See Boustan and Margo (2016) for a review.

if they had not migrated.[24]

It is not currently possible for researchers to build their own datasets of linked census records that reach into the second half of the twentieth century. If and when the 1950 census microdata are made available in a full count file, researchers will be able to re-evaluate the 1940s, the decade with the highest levels of inter-regional migration. Going further, gaining access to administrative data, as in Black et al. (2015), or new census-based projects that link the full count 1940 census into later census and administrative records (Massey et al. 2018) should open the way for extensive study of participants in the later decades of the Great Migration or the children of earlier migrants. Alexander et al. (2017) is notable in this regard, as it uses data linked from 1940 to 2000 to shed new light on migrants' children's educational and labor market outcomes—this is an important frontier in understanding the intergenerational consequences of the Great Migration. These intergenerational channels could be interpreted in light of the framework outlined in Margo (2016) and explored empirically in Collins and Wanamaker (2017). Another important study that builds on administrative data is Derenoncourt (2019), which uses measures of intergenerational mobility derived from administrative records by Chetty and Hendren (2018) to study how large post-1940 inflows of black migrants may have changed northern and western cities in ways that reduced upward economic mobility for subsequent generations. I return to this discussion of northern cities later in the paper.

3.3 Migration patterns: sources and destinations

Figures 1 and 2 convey the magnitude of the geographic redistribution of the black population from 1910 to 1970. But within the South, there was sizable variation across locations in the rate of black out-migration from the region, and within the rest of the US, there was sizable variation in the rate of black in-migration. Furthermore, there was a great deal of migration from place to place *within* the South, which tends to be neglected in studies of the Great Migration. Scholars have long appreciated these facts, and in the late 1960s economists started to undertake econometric analyses of various "push" and "pull" factors that were hypothesized to affect local migration rates. In essence, the cross-place variation provided a means to test economic theories of migration and to "explain" migration rates.

William Vickery (1977), in his 1969 dissertation at the University of Chicago, was one of the first scholars to undertake an econometric analysis of state-level migration patterns from 1900 to 1960. This entailed a methodological step forward because, "None of the earlier research on this

[24] Based on Logan (2009), which studied a sample of Civil War veterans in the late nineteenth century, one might expect selection into migration to be positive in terms of health.

topic exploits the ability of multiple regression analysis to help identify and measure the relative strengths of the main determinants of Negro migration" (p. 9). Of course, this was long before the existence of harmonized IPUMS data. Instead, Vickery analyzes migration at the state level by regressing migration measures on state-level characteristics, separately for each decade. The results are generally consistent with economic interpretations of migration (e.g., locations with higher income levels attract more migrants). Of course, it is tenuous to interpret such conditional correlations as if they measure causal relationships. Even so, by combining economic hypotheses about the determinants of migration with historical perspective (and data) on black migration, Vickery's work provided an empirical foundation on which later work built.[25] Flora Gill's 1975 dissertation (1979) is another important and early econometric study based on state-level data. Collins (1997), which is specifically interested in testing whether the prevalence of European immigration tended to depress rates of black migration to the North, also relies heavily on state- and city-level data from published census volumes.

Collins and Wanamaker (2015) examine migration patterns using micro-level data from linked census records for both black and white male southerners between 1910 and 1930.[26] As described above, an advantage of the linked microdata is the ability to observe an individual's pre-migration background characteristics, including location, in detail. In this paper, we were especially interested in expanding the scope of investigation to include and compare migration patterns of southern white men, who also left the South in large numbers but at lower per capita rates than black men. We show that there were substantial differences in white and black migration patterns and that observable characteristics in 1910 cannot account for those differences in migration patterns. That is, observationally similar men made different location choices depending on their race. We also show that in choosing destinations, black men were more deterred by distance than white men, more attracted to manufacturing centers, and more responsive to variation in labor demand growth. Given some of the literature's emphasis on the interpretation that black men and women migrated to avoid the indignities of Jim Crow and the threat of violence, it is interesting that we find only mixed evidence that black inter-state migrants were more likely than white inter-state migrants to leave the South, conditional on potential destinations' characteristics (e.g., proximity, income levels, industry mix). There were, however, notable black-white differences in choice of destination across non-southern regions (conditional on destination characteristics), with black men sorting more strongly than white men into the industrial Midwest and

[25] Vickery's committee included Robert Fogel, who suggested the topic (Vickery 1977, acknowledgements). Vickery also thanks Larry Sjaastad, who had recently expounded his theory of migration as an investment (1962).
[26] The focus on men reflects the difficulty of linking women over time due to name changes at marriage.

Northeast and white men sorting more strongly into the West. Although beyond the scope of the Collins and Wanamaker data, this pattern changed in the 1940s, when black southerners began migrating to the West (especially California) in much larger numbers.

Stuart and Taylor (2019) provide an even more detailed view of migration patterns by analyzing the Duke SSA/Medicare administrative data, which provides information on town of birth. They illustrate the role of networks in channeling migration from place to place during the Great Migration, finding that one new black migrant from the South tended to pave the way for two additional migrants. The general importance of networks for migration flows has long been appreciated in the social sciences, but the scope, detail, and methodology in this study break new ground.[27]

3.4 The North

In 1910, less than two percent of the non-southern population was black. A few cities had sizable black populations, but for the most part, only a small share of the urban northern population was black.[28] The North held out some promise for economic advancement and political voice relative to the South, though discrimination and assumptions of white supremacy were widespread. James Grossman characterizes Chicago in this pre-Great Migration era as follows: "Although discrimination circumscribed black life in Chicago and interacted with the material circumstances of most migrants to relegate them to the worst housing and least desirable employment in the city, the color line was not ubiquitous. Nor did it reflect the public values embodied in the laws of the state and city" (1989, p. 166). What unfolded in northern cities with the arrival of millions of black migrants after 1910 constitutes an important branch of the Great Migration literature, one that connects the history of black migration to some of today's most pressing domestic policy issues.

In the aftermath of any large influx of immigrants, a natural question for economists is whether and how their arrival affected the receiving area's economy. The impact of migration on local economies and especially local labor markets is an area of common interest and, sometimes, common methods for scholars of the Great Migration and scholars of international migration. Boustan (2009) is a prime example of this common ground in that it studies how the arrival of southern black migrants affected the labor market outcomes of non-migrant black and white workers in the North. The paper's empirical work picks up the story in 1940, when wage data are first

[27] On networks in the Great Migration, also see Carrington et al. (1996) and Chay and Munshi (2015). On more general patterns, also see Tolnay et al. (2005) and Curtis White et al. (2005).

[28] Philadelphia's population was 5.6 percent black in 1910, the highest share among large northern cities. See Du Bois (1899) for an insightful description. Several smaller northern cities had higher black shares than Philadelphia but all were under 10 percent, including St. Louis, Cincinnati, Omaha, Columbus, Indianapolis, and Kansas City. Tabulations are from IPUMS 1910 1-percent sample (Ruggles et al. 2015).

available in the census. Building on methods from the immigration literature, Boustan uses migration-induced variation in the North's black labor supply (measured separately by education-experience bins) to estimate the elasticity of substitution between white and black workers. With this parameter estimate in hand, she calculates the effects of black migration on the wages of northern black and white workers between 1940 and 1970. The estimated effects on white workers' wages were very small, whereas the negative effects on black workers' wages were large for those with 10 or more years of education (12-24 percent) (p. 775).

Beyond labor markets, as mentioned above, some of the earliest attention to the Great Migration in the economics literature was motivated by conditions in northern and western cities in the 1960s, where black migrants tended to live in highly segregated neighborhoods. The literature on residential segregation in American cities is far too large to incorporate in full here. Instead, I will highlight some relatively recent work that investigates the connection between the Great Migration and residential segregation.

Cutler, Glaeser, and Vigdor (1999) is a useful starting point for discussion because it documents and interprets the rise (and fall) of urban residential segregation, spanning from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth centuries.[29] This work is motivated in part by the authors' earlier findings that residential segregation was associated with worse socioeconomic outcomes for young black men and women in the late twentieth century (Cutler and Glaeser 1997).[30] They find a positive correlation between black population growth and increases in segregation after 1910, at least for cities that were not already highly segregated. They conclude that around mid-century, near the height of the Great Migration, white households' collective action, ranging from threats of violence to legal barriers (such as restrictive covenants), enforced high levels of residential segregation. This interpretation is consistent with evidence that black households faced higher housing costs than white households and that there was not a discernable difference in prices paid by recent migrants relative to other black households. The pattern was different in the late twentieth century and more consistent with a view that "decentralized racism" was key—white households tended to sort into exclusively white areas in highly segregated metropolitan areas and paid a premium to do so.

Boustan (2010) directly investigates the connection between southern black migrants to

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[29] An immediate data problem for this work was the lack of detailed spatial units for characterizing segregation prior to 1940. Reliance on political ward boundaries within cities before 1940 was the next-best alternative, but with better data and GIS techniques, scholars can now develop more detailed characterizations of changes within cities in the pre-war period (e.g., Shertzer et al. 2016, Logan and Parman 2017).

[30] Collins and Margo (2000) show that this negative association emerged in the late twentieth century but appears to be absent in mid-twentieth century data.

northern cities and decentralized white responses. She shows that black migration between 1940 and 1970 caused a significant amount of "white flight" from central cities. This interpretation is based on an instrumental variable approach that combines estimates of southern outmigration post-1940 with pre-1940 patterns of black migration (i.e., the share of black migrants from each southern state that migrated to each northern city between 1935 and 1940); in practice, OLS results are fairly similar (Table II). Each black arrival appears to have led to more than two white departures. This process may have had detrimental effects for remaining residents of central cities through fiscal channels and by exacerbating residential segregation, but it may also have facilitated a sizable increase in black homeownership in cities (Boustan and Margo 2013). Shertzer and Walsh (2019) extend the investigation of white flight to the early twentieth century, using data at the neighborhood level within cities. They find evidence of white flight in response to black migrants even at the earliest stages of the Great Migration.

Related to Boustan and Margo (2013), Collins and Margo (2011) show that at a national level, black home ownership rates plateaued at around 25 percent as the Great Migration began. In part, the stagnation reflected the nature of the housing stock in the relatively dense areas of cities where black migrants settled. Despite a sizable increase in income associated with migration, the black population's geographic redistribution into cities tended to depress their home ownership rate, at least prior to 1940. After 1940, even as the Great Migration peaked in intensity, the black home ownership rate increased sharply, doubling by 1970. This was partly driven by black households' lifecycle accumulation of wealth but also by white households' disproportionate departure from central cities (Boustan and Margo 2013).

Derenoncourt (2019) combines methods from Boustan (2010) with more recently revealed information on variation in intergenerational mobility patterns across locations (Chetty and Hendren 2018). In particular, by using a shift-share instrument for black migration to specific northern destinations after 1940 (similar in spirit to Boustan 2010), Derenoncourt estimates that the Great Migration had a negative effect on intergenerational upward mobility (measured at the commuting zone level) in the late twentieth century, particularly for those from low-income families (pp. 18-19). Interesting local policy responses accompanied these changes in mobility; for instance, cities differentially increased their spending on police by the 1960s, perhaps in response to an increasing level of crime. For an earlier period (up to 1930), Tabellini (2019) argues that black migration led to cuts in local spending due to declines in property values.

An important lesson from the work reviewed above is that cities were not passive receptors of black migrants. Rather, residents responded to black migration in ways that amplified the change

in central cities' demographic composition and that may have diminished the economic prospects for those who remained.[31]

4. Speculation

The social and cultural ramifications of the Great Migration extend beyond the traditional purview of the economics literature discussed above. For instance, the implications for American music, art, and literature were profound but too far afield to review here. The implications for black entrepreneurship and business history are closer to economists' wheelhouse and merit more attention (Boyd 1998). In the remaining space, however, I am going to focus on the Great Migration's political and policy ramifications, which ultimately may have diminished the impetus for black migration from the South.

The Great Migration and the Civil Rights Movement both sprang from a context of economic and political deprivation, and both encompassed purposeful efforts by millions of people to make more of their lives' potential than was possible in the Jim Crow South. These movements—one geographic, one political—were coterminous and intertwined, but the connections are underappreciated, or at least underdeveloped, in the empirical literature that studies the Great Migration. In part, I think this is because it is fairly straightforward for economists to study topics such as the determinants of migration or the local economic effects of migrant arrivals—we have well developed (if imperfect) tools for causal inference and measurement in this domain—but it is less straightforward to quantify and describe formally the origins and dynamics of social movements.[32] Recent work by Calderon, Fouka, Tabellini (2019) deserves mention here—it connects variation in black migration to variation in local political support for civil rights, an important step. Yet there is room for expansion on this theme, and it would result in a richer and better-connected economic history of the American twentieth century.

Let me begin by discussing various ways in which the Great Migration might have helped to advance the Civil Rights Movement. It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the redistribution of the black population, in theory, could have worked to undermine the Civil Rights agenda by generating a backlash among northern whites. It is also important to recognize that discrimination and racism were commonplace in the North, even if the institutions of white

[31] Landmarks in the sociology literature that address the link between residential segregation and negative outcomes for black workers include Wilson (1987), Massey and Denton (1993), and Sharkey (2013).
[32] See Chong (1991) and also Collins (2003a and 2006), which study the political economy of anti-discrimination laws at the state level.

supremacy ("Jim Crow") were less fully developed and enforced than in the South. Nonetheless, there was scope for agency and advancement associated with migration to the North, and I would argue that this helped to propel the Civil Rights Movement. As James Gregory observes, "There was a particular regional dynamic behind the twentieth-century drive for rights and equality, an almost Archimedean logic: African Americans had to leave the South in order to gain the leverage needed to lift it and the rest of the nation out of Jim Crow segregation" (2005, p. 237).

Cities in general are hubs for innovative ideas and political organization, and the Great Migration entailed the large-scale urbanization of the black population. Centers of black migration became centers of black political power, particularly Chicago and New York.[33] In his history of the Civil Rights Movement in the North, Thomas Sugrue writes, "the scope and scale and form of racial protest changed dramatically as millions of African Americans moved northward in the 1920s…In the wake of the influx, northern cities became hothouses of organizing" (2008, p. xx). The influx of black migrants sometimes affected the balance of political power *within* northern cities (Gregory 2005), where many voted for the first time. But the argument here is that black migrants, their descendants, and their political allies were eventually able to project that power nationally. Eric Schickler (2016) and Keneshia Grant (2019) have recently taken up this theme. How this was accomplished should be a central part of the story of the Great Migration, as well as the story of the Civil Rights Movement.

Almost immediately, the Great Migration brought stronger ties between black communities in the North and South, meaning that news and ideas traveled widely and quickly (at least in comparison to the pre-war period). The most commonly cited examples of communication pertain to personal letters, holiday travel, and northern-based black newspapers that were widely circulated in the South.[34] The North was not a "promised land," but the message was loud and clear that conditions in the North were different and, for many, attractive. This encouraged more migration from the South, of course. And (more speculatively) the juxtaposition of life in the North may have demonstrated the possibility of a different political and social equilibrium under American law and institutions, despite widespread discrimination, one that at least entailed fundamental civil rights, including the rights to vote and protest.

Over a longer span of time, northern black residents gained traction on the fundamental

[33] Gregory (2005, chapter 7) develops this theme in more depth.
[34] See the map of the Defender's shipping list in Grossman (1989, pp. 76-77). Also see Panels 33 and 34 of Jacob Lawrence's Migration Series, which highlight that letters and newspapers were important sources of information in spurring migration. Lawrence's paintings present a history of the Great Migration up to the early 1940s.

problems of formulating and advancing anti-discrimination policy (Lockard 1968; Collins 2003a, 2006; Sugrue 2008). The principles and policies commonly associated with the federal 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1968 Fair Housing Act were pioneered years before, even decades before, in northern cities and states. These policies were advocated and advanced by a political coalition that included black civil rights organizations, of course, and also labor organizations, Jewish organizations, and others that were sympathetic to the principles at stake.[35] These state and local policies might not have delivered major advances in black workers' economic status in the North (Collins 2003b, 2004), but they were an important policy departure from the historical norm of laissez faire with respect to racial discrimination in the private sector.

The state-level anti-discrimination policies borrowed heavily from language and policies implemented by executive order during World War II (Reed 1991, Collins 2001). A. Philip Randolph, the influential leader of the black labor union of Sleeping Car Porters (based in New York), spurred Roosevelt's executive orders by threatening to lead a March on Washington to demand the opening of defense jobs to black workers. Again, successfully advancing the idea that discrimination was not only morally wrong but that the government could and should do something about it was path breaking.

By the time federal civil rights legislation was passed in the 1960s, the overwhelming majority of northern black residents were already covered by comparable state legislation. The extension of such protections to the South in the mid-1960s was revolutionary, but the ideas and policies had been developing and expanding for decades beforehand thanks to a political coalition that was catalyzed and strengthened by black migration to northern cities. This coalition prioritized anti-discrimination policies in response to black leaders' demands.

I would also highlight a less direct but perhaps fundamental aspect of the Great Migration and its connection to the Civil Rights Movement. To the extent that the Civil Rights Movement depended on a growing professional and middle-class black population for resources, energy, and leadership, it is plausible that better educational opportunities in the North were complementary to political activism over the long haul of the Civil Rights Movement. Through the early twentieth century, black elementary schools were relatively poorly funded and black public high schools were scarce in the South (Caliver 1933, Margo 1990, Carruthers and Wanamaker 2013), with clear implications for black educational attainment. For perspective on the regional differences in education, consider the situation of young black adults circa 1940. In the 1940 IPUMS sample,

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[35] Photos of the anti-discrimination bill signings in *Trends in Housing* (a newsletter published by National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing) typically include representatives from each of these groups.

among 18 to 22 year olds, the rate of high school completion (>=12 years of education) was three times higher in the North than in the South (27 versus 9 percent). Tabulations specifically for those born outside the South but with parents born in the South (likely children of migrants) are similar. For similar age ranges, young black adults' college attendance rate was about twice as high outside the South. Though I have only sketched the idea here, it is plausible that a rapidly growing, predominantly urban, and better-educated black population in the North mattered to the timing and success of the Civil Rights Movement. It is also possible that the threat of migration (and loss of local workers) led to improvements in southern black schools (Margo 1990, pp. 48-50), at least relative to a counterfactual with more limited outside options.[36]

What would the Civil Rights Movement have looked like and accomplished in the absence of the Great Migration? Can the two be separated and addressed in a meaningful counterfactual sense (even for an essay that demands "speculation")? Tackling this head on is difficult, but it is the sort of thing we should contemplate when trying to assess the importance of the connection. This runs into the immediate problem is that it is hard to imagine there being World War I and II without generating internal migration to industrial centers, so this is shaky ground. Nonetheless, in light of the discussion above, I would venture this: Without the Great Migration, there would have been less scope for black Americans' political organization and power; there would have been less attention drawn to what Gunnar Myrdal (1944) called the "American Creed" during World War II and in its wake; there would have been weaker ties between the northern and southern black communities and activists;[37] there would have been little or no groundwork for anti-discrimination policy in state law; and northern politicians might well have neglected the black population's interests and rights, as they had for decades before the Great Migration. Thus, the Civil Rights Movement might have been slower, later, and less revolutionary in its effects than what actually happened.[38] Even a marginally weaker Civil Rights Movement might have fallen short of key legislative achievements in the 1960s.

I should point out that pressure for change might still have mounted within the South without the Great Migration—rising black urbanization, education, and income would have pushed in this direction. Outside the South, pressure might have mounted due to the Cold War (Dudziak 2000), in which the treatment of black Americans was an international embarrassment. Judicial decisions

[36] In addition, the NAACP, based in New York, began contesting discrimination in southern school systems decades before the *Brown v. Board* decision of 1954. See Tushnet (1987).

[37] By mid-century, Sugrue points out that, "…northern and southern activists influenced one another…Northern activists shared their experiences with their southern counterparts, and by turn, they were moved to action by the example of the southern civil rights movement" (2008, p. xviii).

[38] One might also argue that the 1960 election of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson hinged on winning a close vote in Illinois, a major destination for black migrants.

might have worked to undermine Jim Crow institutions (though southern resistance to the *Brown v. Board* decision is notable). In addition, the diffusion of television and televised violence against black Americans might have finally moved northern white politicians to act. But in the end, I speculate that the Great Migration mattered and was, in fact, decisive in the arrival of a Civil Rights revolution in the 1960s.

5. Conclusion

Millions of people directly improved their lives by participating in the Great Migration instead of staying in the South. To be sure, there was variation in the migrants' gains (or losses), and there are important caveats regarding the long-term health of migrants (Black et al. 2015), the shifting geography of upward mobility (Derenoncourt 2019), and the ill effects of hyper-segregated cities in the later decades of the twentieth century (Massey and Denton 1993, Cutler and Glaeser 1997, Collins and Margo 2000). But it is hard to deny that by migrating, many black Americans were able to make more of their lives' potential—on several dimensions—than was possible at that time in the South.

In addition to the gains one might ascribe to the migrants at an individual level, it is entirely possible that their departure improved the lives of those who stayed in the South through general equilibrium channels (e.g., higher wages, better schools). Moreover, and even more importantly for those who remained in the South, the Great Migration made the Civil Rights Movement stronger than it otherwise could have been. The regional redistribution of the black population provided leverage and resources, and it helped to make the redress of racial discrimination and disparities a national policy priority for the first time since Reconstruction. The result was a revolution in southern social and political institutions that broadly benefited southerners, white and black (Wright 2013), and marked a turning point in US history. This interpretation highlights the difficulty—and importance—of assessing the causal effect of the Great Migration on black Americans' well being in the twentieth century. Measuring the migrants' gains in the presence of selection is a challenge by itself, but further challenges await scholars in assessing the intergenerational effects, the general equilibrium effects through economic channels, and the broader social effects through political and policy channels.

The research on the Great Migration described in this paper has made progress in illuminating its causes and some of its consequences. It also demonstrates that new data and new techniques have provided and will continue to provide deeper insight and higher-resolution descriptions. Oftentimes, these advances have engaged long-standing questions—who moved, what

did they gain or lose, what were the effects on local labor or housing markets—and one hopes that they will also encourage novel approaches to studying the diffusion of ideas about fairness and justice, the dynamics of race and politics, and how the Civil Rights revolution was accomplished.

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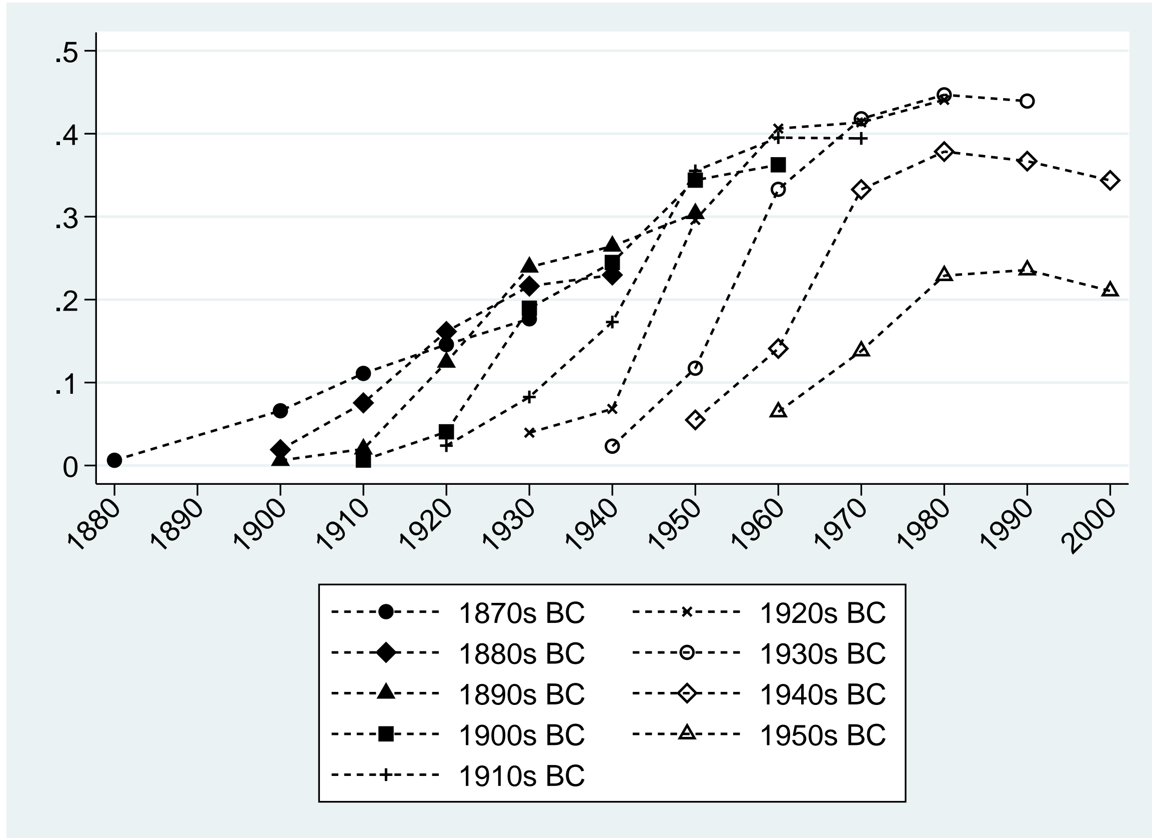
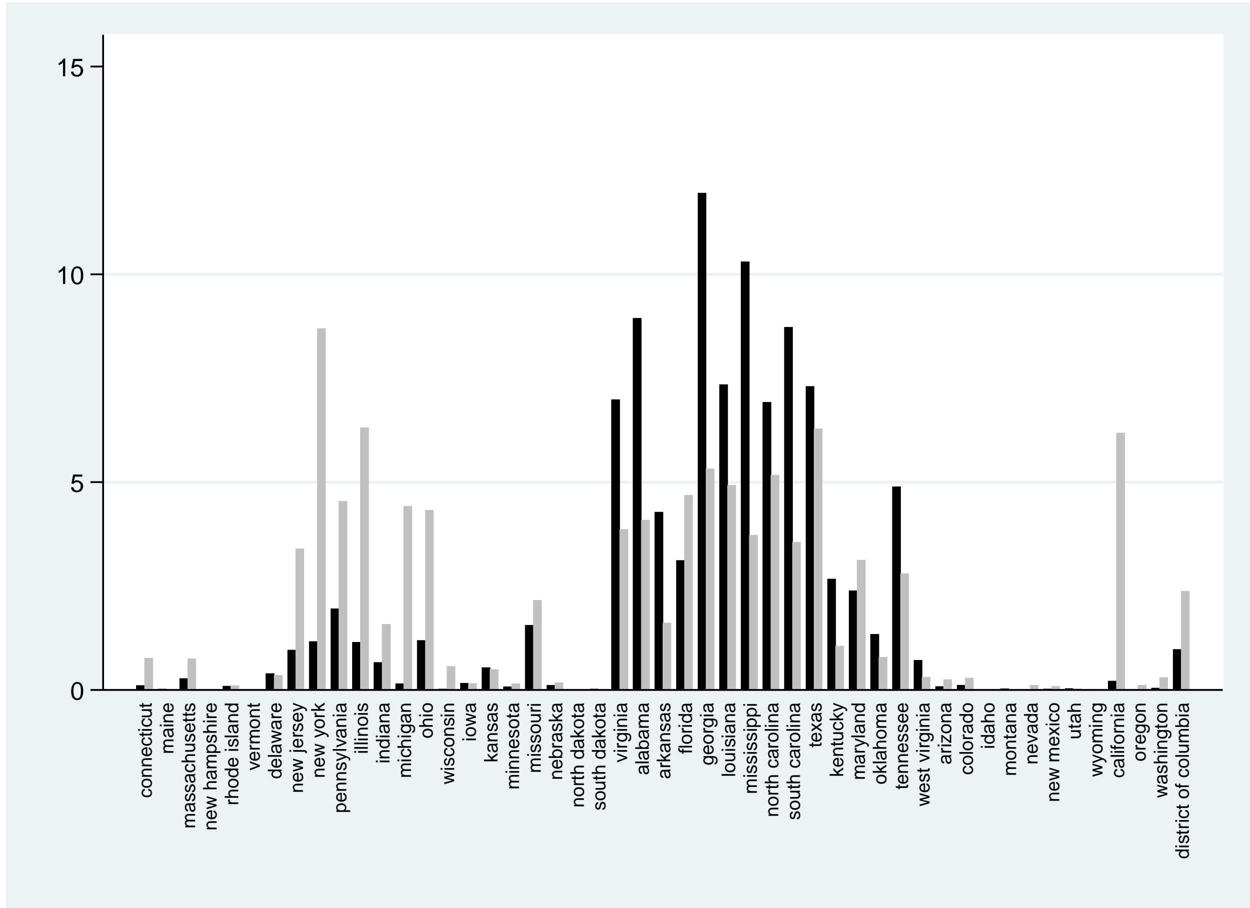
Figure 1: Share of Southern-Born Black Population Residing Outside the South, by Birth Cohort



Notes: The South in this figure excludes Delaware, Maryland, and Washington, DC. The year markers on the x-axis correspond to census years. For example, in 1990, just over 20 percent of the cohort born in the South in the 1950s resided outside the South, whereas more than 40 percent of cohort born in the South in the 1930s resided outside the South.

Sources: Author's calculations from the IPUMS 1-percent samples (Ruggles et al. 2015).

Figure 2: Distribution of the black population, 1910 and 1970, by state



Notes: Black bars depict the distribution of the black population in 1910 (these sum to 100 over states). Gray bars depict the distribution of the black population 1970.
Sources: 1910 IPUMS 1-percent sample. 1970 IPUMS 1-percent state F1 sample. Ruggles et al. (2015).

Figure 3A: Occupations, men, ages 25-54, 1930 (top panel) and 1960 (bottom panel)

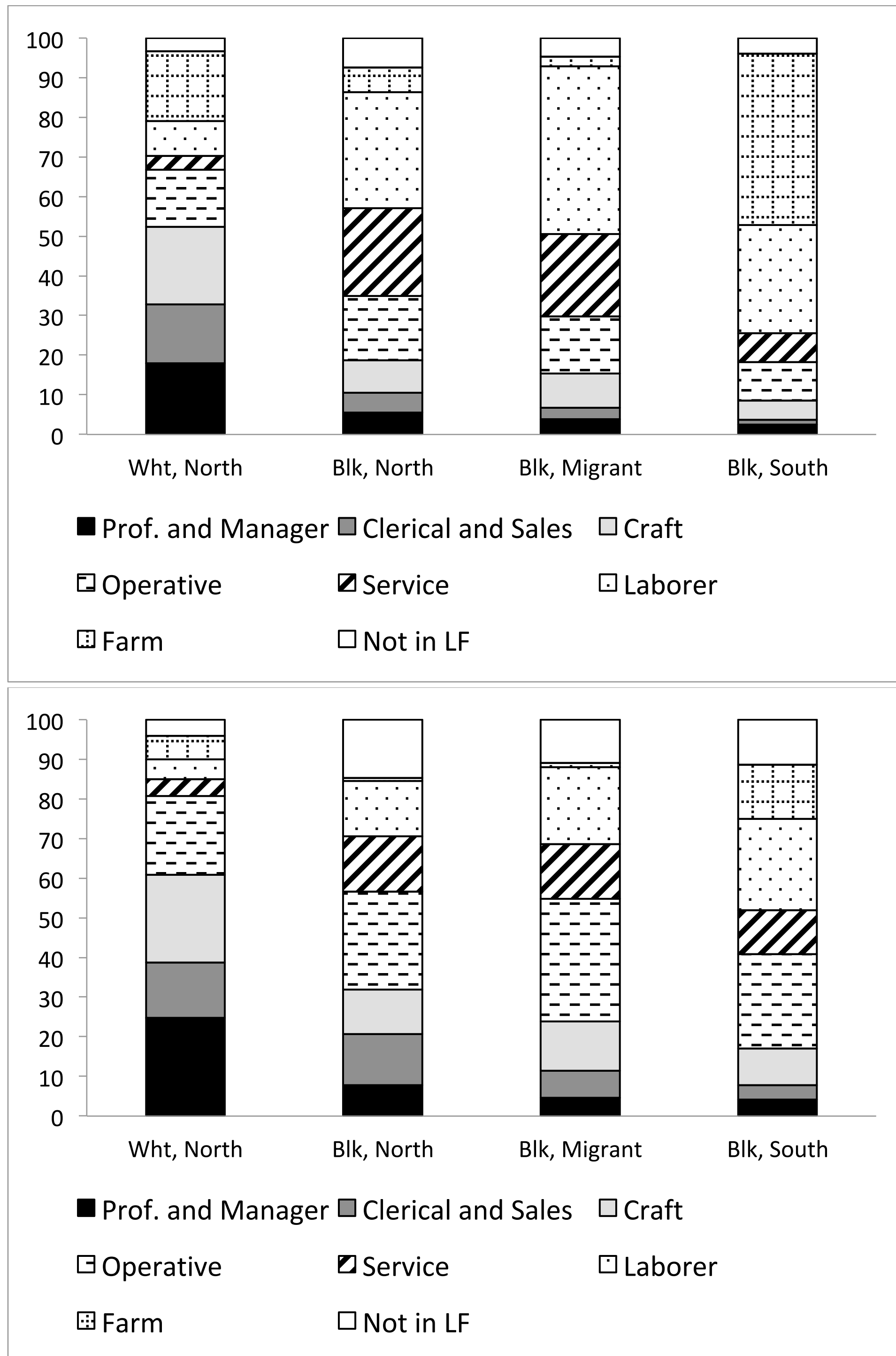
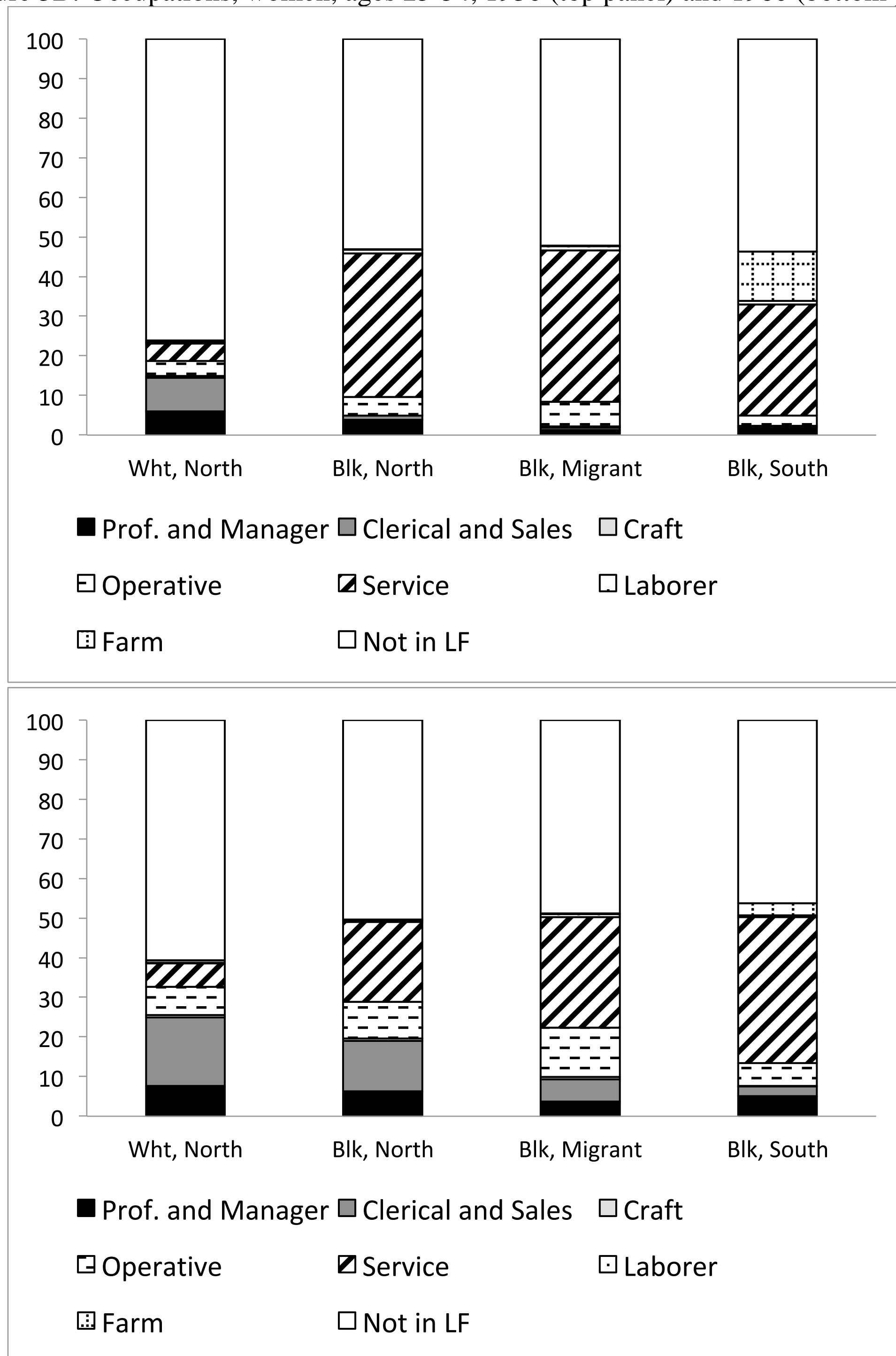
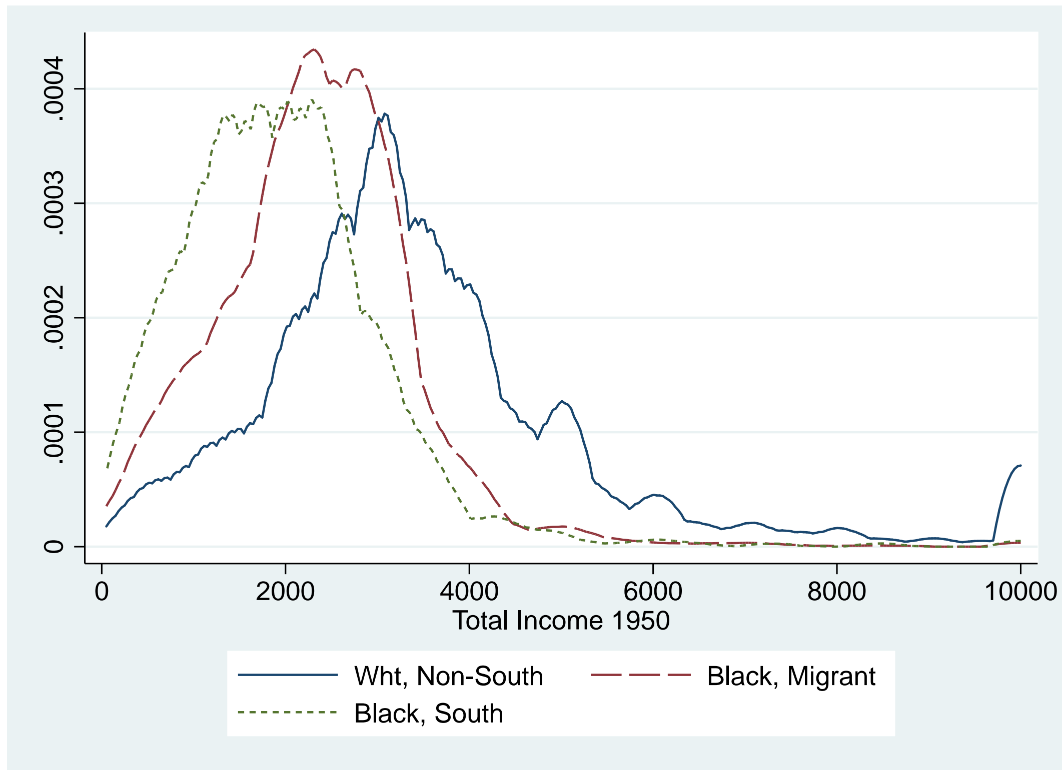


Figure 3B: Occupations, women, ages 25-54, 1930 (top panel) and 1960 (bottom panel)



Notes: Samples include US-born men (3A) or women (3B) ages 25-54. "Blk, North" denotes black men born and residing outside the South. "Blk, Migrant" denotes southern-born black men residing outside the South. "Blk, South" donotes black men born and residing in the South. The "South" includes Washington, DC, following the census region coding. The "Farm" category includes farmers and farm laborers; the "service" category includes both household and non-household service workers. Those in the military (occ1950=595) and those reported as in the labor force but without an occupation code are omitted.
Sources: IPUMS 1-percent sample for 1930 and 5-percent sample for 1960 (Ruggles et al. 2015).

Figure 4: Distribution of total income in 1949, non-farm male workers, ages 25-54



Notes: The figure depicts kernel density plots of annual income in 1949. The sample includes men, ages 25-54, who worked at least 1 week in 1949 and reported positive total income, and who were not farmers, farm managers, or farm laborers. The variable topcode is $10,000.
Sources: IPUMS 1-percent sample for 1950 (Ruggles et al. 2015).