

NBER WORKING PAPER SERIES

LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND RACIAL INEQUALITY
IN FEDERAL PROGRAM ACCESS:
INSIGHTS FROM NEW DEAL WORK RELIEF

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Working Paper 32681
<http://www.nber.org/papers/w32681>

NATIONAL BUREAU OF ECONOMIC RESEARCH

1050 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138
July 2024, Revised December 2025

We would like to thank Shawn Kantor, Marianne Wanamaker, Trevon Logan, John Parman, and Paul Rhode for sharing data. We benefited from the comments of participants in the 2022 Japan Socio-Economic History Society Meetings, the University of Arizona Economics Department 2020 Summer Workshop, the University of Victoria 2020 workshop, the IPUMS 2021 Data Intensive Research Projects, the NBER Summer Institute, the Yale Conference on Resilience in Economic History, the Virtual Economic History Seminar Sponsored by the EHA and the Cliometrics Society, LERA 2019 Session at the ASSA meetings, 2018 Social Science History Meetings, and the 2018 World Economic History Conference. We received valuable feedback from Dan Herbst, Maggie Jones, Shawn Kantor, Juan Pantano, and Tiemen Woutersen. The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Bureau of Economic Research.

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JEL No. J08, J45, J78, N32, N42

ABSTRACT

New Deal programs provided relief jobs for millions of unemployed Americans. Although the federal government sought to prohibit racial discrimination, eligibility was determined by local administrators. Using the 1940 Census, we estimate county-level Black–White gaps in WPA employment. The estimates show that about 40% of Black male workers lived in counties where their rate of work relief employment was the same or higher than similar White male workers, including 24% in the South. Black workers’ relative access to work relief was higher where the White unemployment rate was lower and where local governments had more resources.

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Local administration and racial inequality in federal program access: Insights from New Deal work relief

Abstract

New Deal programs provided relief jobs for millions of unemployed Americans. Although the federal government sought to prohibit racial discrimination, eligibility was determined by local administrators. Using the 1940 Census, we estimate county-level Black–White gaps in WPA employment. The estimates show that about 40% of Black male workers lived in counties where their rate of work relief employment was the same or higher than similar White male workers, including 24% in the South. Black workers’ relative access to work relief was higher where the White unemployment rate was lower and where local governments had more resources.

In the 1930s, New Deal relief and public works agencies were among the first government organizations in American history to declare a goal of eliminating racial discrimination in program administration. The 1933 Unemployment Relief Act declared, “in employing citizens for the purposes of this Act no discrimination shall be made on account of race, color, or creed” (U.S. Congress 1933). Later, President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1935 executive order establishing employment conditions for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) declared that “workers who are qualified by training and experience to be assigned to work projects shall not be discriminated against on any grounds” (Roosevelt 1935). While these federal declarations represented a clear intention to avoid discrimination, the actual extent to which this intention was conducted was in the hands of state and local administrators, who determined eligibility for and access to work relief programs. These decisions were consequential—relief jobs were a lifeline for workers during the Great Depression, and their distribution had important and lasting implications for local labor markets.

In this paper, we focus on work relief programs during the New Deal and the tension between centralized goals of nondiscrimination and the decentralized administration of those programs. We specifically examine relative rates of relief employment among Black workers in 1940, five years after

these federal nondiscrimination policies were declared. Most relief jobs were obtained through the Works Progress Administration, which was the main organization offering work relief by 1940. Contemporary observers recognized the potential for local administrators to undermine federal nondiscrimination goals for this program. WPA administrations had discussions about problems with discrimination on WPA projects in the South and debates about whether to establish centralized authority over projects (Howard 1943, Sterner 1943).

Empirically quantifying differential access to work relief jobs between Black and White workers is complex because differences in rates of relief employment between those two groups may be due to differential treatment by program administrators and to differences in the economic and demographic characteristics of the two groups. Public works legislation mandated that relief jobs should be allocated to those “in need,” implying that individuals facing greater economic hardship should have been more likely to secure these positions. Additionally, officials considered other factors such as household size, educational attainment, and recent mobility when distributing jobs (Howard 1943).

To disentangle the roles of local administration and individual factors in determining relief employment, our study uses data from the full count 1940 census. We estimate racial differences in work relief employment rates, controlling for observable determinants of need and eligibility such as household structure, education, and mobility. We interpret our results as conditional Black-White differences in access to work relief. By comparing Black and White workers within the same county and conditioning on worker and household characteristics, we aim to isolate how local administrative practices shaped racial gaps in relief employment. We report results for the U.S. overall and by region, and we test the robustness of our findings across samples and specifications.

To identify geographic variation in program administration and explore its determinants, we estimate our model of relief employment separately for each county in our sample. We examine the

distributions of the resulting estimates of Black-White gaps in relief employment by region. We then link these estimates to a broad set of county-level covariates that proxy for factors including economic development and urbanicity, local labor market conditions, relative political and economic power of Black residents, racial attitudes, and local government resources and relief funding. We use county-level regressions to explore the relative contributions of these factors in determining Black-White gaps in relief employment rates.

We find that outside of the South, Black men had consistently higher rates of work relief than White men. Within the South, Black men had lower rates of relief, though with substantial variation across counties. This pattern shows up in the pooled regressions and in the county-by-county regressions, and we confirm its robustness to alternative sampling choices and regression specifications. Coefficients on other individual and household covariates are similar between regions, suggesting that other individual level determinants of relief participation were not different in the South. We explore how differences in occupational distribution between Black and White workers contribute to the Black-White gaps in relief and show that gaps are similar when adding controls for prior occupation using linked 1930 census data.

We estimate that around 40 percent of Black men in the United States lived in counties where New Deal work relief programs in 1940 provided at least as much access to Black men as to White men. The shares across regions were 94 percent in the Midwest, 90 percent in the West, 77 percent in the Northeast, and 24 percent in the South. Compared to previous eras, this implies a generally positive change in the experience of Black Americans in dealing with government at all levels. However, access is only one dimension; Black workers on work relief might still have been funneled into lower-skilled work relief assignments with consequent lower earnings.¹

¹ We had hoped to use the 1940 census to compare earnings for Black and White emergency relief workers, but measurement error and selection concerns were too great. The Census identifies whether someone was on work relief at the end of March 1940, whereas the income and weeks-worked questions referred to 1939. Many

Based on our county level results, we find that Black workers had relatively higher rates of relief employment in areas with higher White employment rates in regular jobs relative to Black employment rates and where local governments had more resources. In such counties unemployed Whites were in a better position to obtain regular jobs, which likely mitigated discrimination. Outside of the South, Black workers had higher rates of relief employment in counties with lower percent Black and a larger foreign-born population. Non-citizens were ineligible for work relief, so they would not have been in competition for relief work. These results suggest that Black men had better access to work relief in places where White men had less demand for relief, and where the pool of relief resources was larger. Consistent with claims that the Republican party had been more favorable to Black interests since the Civil War, counties with higher shares voting for Democrats for president offered less relative access for Black men to work relief.

Our results underscore the key role of local administrators in determining access to federal programs. We demonstrate that local administration of federal work relief during the New Deal era led to substantial geographic variation in Black-White gaps in relief employment in 1940. Given the importance of work relief jobs to the labor market during the Great Depression, disparities in relief employment likely had long-run significance, affecting both local economic structures and individual economic mobility for Black workers. Our findings also speak more broadly to the underlying conflict inherent in federal programs with decentralized administration: local decision-making always has potential to undermine centralized goals for a program and to generate geographic disparities in program implementation. This issue remains important today, as large federal safety net programs including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance

people on work relief in March 1940 likely had earnings from non-relief jobs in 1939. Margo (1991) suggested comparing earnings for men who were continuously on work relief for at least 16 months, but this is a highly selected sample.

Program (SNAP), and Medicaid are federally funded but locally administered, with states exercising varying degrees of discretion over spending and eligibility.²

Background: Black Americans and the New Deal

Black Americans experienced varied treatment across New Deal programs. The national pension system in the Social Security Act of 1935 seemed to establish race-neutral rules, but it excluded the self-employed and workers in domestic service and agriculture—65 percent of Black workers in 1930 versus 45 percent of White workers (Sterner 1943, pp. 214-215). Lieberman (1998, pp. 80-111) describes how social security eligibility expanded eventually to include these workers in the 1950s.³ Black farm workers were also disproportionately burdened by Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) programs that paid farmers to take land out of production, contributing to a drop in the number of Black tenants and sharecroppers (Depew, Fishback, and Rhode 2013). Sterner (1943, pp. 282–286) found that in the late 1930s, Black children in most Southern states were less likely to be accepted for the Aid for Dependent Children program and received lower benefits.

Recent work has sought to examine the roles played by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) mortgage refinance program and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) mortgage insurance programs in contributing to housing segregation.⁴ When refinancing troubled mortgages, the HOLC appears to have been helpful to Black borrowers because Black households in 1940 accounted for 4.5 percent of the HOLC loans compared with only 2.5 percent among all other types

² Aboulafia et al. (2025) provide a recent example, studying impacts of the Affordable Care Act on health insurance coverage over time and across U.S. states. They highlight that in addition to the geographic variation generated by some states declining or delaying Medicaid expansion, there has been substantial variation across states in the implementation and effectiveness of marketplace subsidies.

³ Alston and Ferrie (1999) and Katznelson (2013) discuss the role of race and Southern leaders’ opposition to Social Security in the political disputes over the Social Security Act. Fishback (2015b) shows that Southern leaders were joined by politicians from other regions in opposing the Act.

⁴ There has been an extensive debate about the role played by the HOLC mapping program. As a starting point, see Aaronson et al. (2021); Fishback et al. (2023), and Fishback et al. (2022).

of lenders. On the other hand, the percentage of Black mortgages insured by the FHA, which focused on higher-valued homes and new construction in suburbs, was lower (Fishback et al. 2023; Fishback et al. 2022).

Several New Deal employment programs explicitly declared nondiscriminatory policies. In addition to the Unemployment Relief Act and the WPA, the Public Works Administration (PWA) formalized nondiscrimination by issuing public housing contracts requiring that the share of the skilled-worker payroll going to Black workers reflect the local Black share of skilled labor (Hill 2005, Anderson 2004, pp. 11-13). When the Federal Works Agency became the umbrella agency for the WPA, PWA, and other public works agencies, they sought to “guard against any discrimination based on race.”⁵ The Roosevelt administration continued to make anti-discriminatory claims during World War II and created the Fair Employment Practices Committee to prevent discrimination by employers against Black workers in defense and government jobs (Collins 2001).

With these federal nondiscrimination declarations in mind, our paper focuses on racial disparities in access to work relief programs. We study 1940 because the full count census in that year includes information on employment in public emergency relief jobs as well as many of the individual and household characteristics that would have influenced whether someone was eligible for relief employment. There were three major federal public emergency work relief programs at the time of our sample. The major program was the WPA, which largely employed workers in the construction of public works projects and paid about half to two-thirds of the hourly wages in the industrial sector. The WPA was large, employing more than three million people at its peak and

⁵The Federal Works Agency (1940, p. 23) stated: “With a view to coordinating racial relations policies of the constituent agencies, in order that all citizens might share in the opportunity for work and in the benefits of its programs, the Federal Works Agency seeks to guard against any discrimination in employment based on race or discrimination in the receipt of benefits flowing from the programs of the constituent agencies.” The Federal Works Agency included the Works Projects Administration, Public Works Administration, Public Roads Administration, Public Building Administration, and U.S. Housing Authority.

accounting for at least 30 percent of all nonrepayable New Deal grants distributed across the country between 1936 and 1939 (Fishback 2015, Table 2). Most relief jobs obtained through the WPA were non-farm labor jobs. For many workers, those jobs required less skill than their prior occupation. The other two work relief programs at the time were youth programs—the National Youth Administration (NYA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC)—which targeted young men between the ages of 16 and 24 and paid lower wages (Federal Security Agency 1940, p. 16).⁶

Eligibility for WPA jobs required certification by a state or local agency that a person was employable and in need (Howard 1943). The agencies determined need by comparing family income to a standard budget adjusted for family composition. State and local relief agencies also determined eligibility and selected workers for the youth relief programs, with help from local schools (Federal Security Agency 1940, pp. 13-15, 67-70; Federal Security Agency, 1943, pp. 49 and 85). The budgets and incomes used for certifying eligibility varied substantially across the country and in many parts of the South, the agencies defined budget needs differently by race (Howard 1943, 380-7, 390). The definitions of need and eligibility were hazy enough to give a high level of discretion to local relief administrators. In 1936, federal relief administrator Harry Hopkins was asked how many eligible people were not on work relief and replied that it was “a matter of opinion and not a matter of statistical data” (Howard 1943, p. 448).

There was likely more scope for racial disparities, and more geographic variation in administration, within earlier New Deal work relief programs than there was within the WPA by 1940. Under the Federal Emergency Relief Assistance (FERA) program, which began in 1933, the national government distributed grants to the states, and then the state and local governments determined

⁶The NYA provided training and part-time jobs to young people, with an emphasis on education and vocational skills. The CCC was primarily outdoor manual labor in conservation and natural resources. To compare earnings across different work relief programs, see Federal Works Agency (1940, pp. 206, 312, 424-5) and Federal Security Agency (1943, pp. 57, 115-116).

how to distribute the funds within the states. FERA head Harry Hopkins became dissatisfied with this system and fought with several states about their internal distributions. Hopkins' dissatisfaction was one of several reasons why the FERA was replaced by the WPA in 1935 as the primary source of relief (Wallis, Fishback, and Kantor 2006). Under the WPA, state and local officials still played an important role because they determined whether someone was eligible for work relief, while the federal government retained control of the project and its payroll (Howard 1943). Another important difference is that the federal government made explicit statements about nondiscrimination within WPA, but we have found no such statements for FERA. We revisit the generalizability of the 1940 results later in the paper.

Data and Institutional Context

Data Source and Key Variables

The primary data for our analysis are from the 1940 full count Census sample, obtained from IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2015). This was the first census to use modern definitions of labor force participation and unemployment and shares a common universe and category definitions with subsequent U.S. census samples. What makes the 1940 census unique is the treatment of relief employment. In that year only, the census specifically identifies persons employed on public emergency work projects associated with the New Deal.

The 1940 census was taken on April 1, and the employment question referred to the week of March 24-30, 1939. The survey asked, regarding each person in the household, “Was this person at work for pay or profit in private or nonemergency government work during the week of March 14-30? If not, was he at work on, or assigned to, public emergency work (WPA, NYA, CCC etc.) during the

week of March 24-30 (Yes or No)? If neither at work nor assigned to public emergency work, was this person seeking work?" Our relief employment indicator is equal to one if a respondent is identified to be "at work, public emergency" during the reference week. The other employment options are "employed", "unemployed", and "not in labor force." To be considered unemployed, a person had to be not only without a job, but also actively looking for work. However, the 1940 census did not specify a period within which a person needed to have last sought a job.

Our measure of the work relief employment rate is equal to the number of men reporting public emergency work divided by the number of workers who were "eligible" for relief, which we define to be the sum of the number unemployed and the number on work relief.⁷ We confirm that our results are robust to counting people who are not in the labor force as unemployed. Though the census employment questions are asked of all individuals over the age of 14, we restrict our sample to Black and White male U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 65 years old. Non-citizens and individuals under age 18 were not eligible for work relief.⁸ We limit our regression sample to individuals living in counties with at least 20 unemployed Black males and at least 20 unemployed White males.⁹ We have a total of 1,413 counties and almost 5 million individuals in our regression sample.

⁷ We verified that the regional patterns in relief access that we document are not driven by differential selection into eligibility by examining racial differences in the probability of being unemployed or on relief, conditional on observable individual and household characteristics. We found that conditional unemployment gaps were large outside the South—where Black men were substantially more likely than White men to be without regular employment—but were close to zero in Southern counties. These differences likely reflect regional industrial structure and run counter to the patterns in relief access in the South, indicating that differential selection into the eligible pool cannot account for the main results. The results are available from the authors upon request.

⁸ Females were eligible for work relief jobs, but their jobs and determinants of selection were different. We plan to study the determinants of women's relief employment in a subsequent project.

⁹ Our results are robust to using a cutoff of 10 unemployed White and Black men or to using a cutoff of 20 White men and 20 Black men (see Online Appendix Table B4).

The Labor Market in 1940

Table 1 presents labor market statistics for Black and White men in the full census and in our regression sample. Both panels show that Black men in the 1940 sample had a similar labor force participation rate to White men, but had a lower share employed and higher shares unemployed and on work relief than White men. Separating the samples by region, Black workers in non-Southern counties were especially disadvantaged in the labor market, with a much lower employment rate, a high unemployment rate, and a high rate of work relief employment. Turning to work relief rates (as a share of eligible workers) in Panel A, in non-Southern counties, Black workers had a relief rate of 44.9 percent—more than 11 percentage points higher than the rate for White workers in the same counties. In Southern counties, meanwhile, Black workers had a relief rate of 39.2 percent, which is 6.8 percentage points lower than the rate for White workers.

We illustrate regional differences in work relief employment rates with scatter plots in Figure 1, where each county is represented by a circle that expands with the size of the Black population and a 45-degree line is included as a point of reference. These figures show wide variation across counties in each region in the share of men who were not employed in regular work (i.e. “eligible for relief”) and in the share of potentially eligible workers who held relief jobs. The bottom right panel shows that unemployed Black workers had better higher work relief rates in most non-Southern counties. However, these figures show raw gaps and do not yet account for differences in characteristics between Black and White workers in each region.

To further underscore geographic variation in work relief participation by race, Black and White work relief rates by state for the 28 states with at least 10,000 Black men in the labor force are presented in Table 2. Outside the South, the Black-White gap in work relief rates were all positive, ranging from 21.4 percentage points in Michigan to 2.9 percentage points in Pennsylvania. Within the

South, only the District of Columbia, Delaware, and Maryland had positive Black-White gaps, while gaps in other states were negative, ranging from -2.8 percentage points in Oklahoma to -15.4 in Mississippi.

Occupational Distributions by Labor Force Status, Race, and Region

One set of possible determinants of racial differences in access to work relief jobs is the occupational distributions of unemployed workers and of work relief jobs. We use the 1940 Census data and linked data from the 1930 Census to the 1940 Census to examine the occupations reported by workers in each category to better understand the role of occupation in work relief. Table 3 presents the occupational distributions of workers by labor force status, race, and region in 1940. In both regions, Black workers were more concentrated in jobs that relied on less formal education. In Southern counties this included farming and farm labor. In non-Southern counties, Black workers were primarily working as non-farm laborer and in service work. White workers also worked in farming in the South, and in both regions were more likely to work in professional and technical occupations, management, clerical, and sales, and to be craftsmen and operatives.

The economic downturn associated with the Great Depression clearly had different impacts across different occupations. Differences between the “usual” occupation shares of the unemployed workers who had worked previously and the occupation shares of employed workers show which occupations were hit especially hard. Throughout the country and for both White and Black workers, farm workers were largely protected from the impacts of the recession, while non-farm laborers were hit the hardest. In both regions, over 40 percent of unemployed Black men and over 20 percent of unemployed White men were non-farm laborers.

Importantly, work relief jobs were heavily skewed toward non-farm labor positions, which accounted for a full 80.7 percent of relief jobs for Black workers in the South and 75.8 percent

elsewhere. Some relief jobs for White workers involved skilled occupations, but non-farm labor jobs accounted for more than half of relief jobs for that group as well in both regions. This is not surprising, as most WPA jobs contributed to public works projects—the building of schools, roads, airports, parks, and other public buildings.

The unskilled nature of most relief jobs meant that many workers were taking relief jobs that were below their skill level. We take this to suggest that occupational match was likely not a primary determinant of relief employment. To further cement this idea, consider a situation in which the usual occupational distribution for the men on work relief was the same as the usual distribution for the unemployed. Assume further that the unemployed in each occupation were given the same occupations on work relief until each occupation was filled and then surplus workers were then redistributed to non-farm labor. Based on differences between columns (3) and (5) and between columns (4) and (6) of Table 2, in the South, about 37 percent of unemployed men of both races would have been moved from their usual occupation into non-farm labor when on work relief; outside the South, about 34 percent of men would have been moved to non-farm labor. Most of those men were likely operatives, farm laborers, craftsmen, and sales workers because the share of relief jobs in those occupations fell short of the share of usual occupations among unemployed workers. Among Black workers, the men likely to end up in non-farm labor included men formerly in household service and service outside the household.

Using linked 1930 and 1940 Census data, we show occupational transitions by 1930 occupation in Online Appendix Table B2. Non-farm laborers in 1930 were the most likely to be on work relief and least likely to be employed in the regular labor market in 1940. Online Appendix Table B3 splits up the transitions by region and race. In the South, 4.7 percent of White farmers and farm managers in 1930 ended up on relief in 1940. This was nearly double the rate of 2.7 percent for Black farmers and farm managers in 1930. Outside of farming, Black men were more concentrated than

White men in 1930 occupations that had high relief rates and low employment rates in 1940. In the South, 45 percent of Black men were in 1930 occupations that were high relief and low employment in 1940, compared with only 27 percent of White men. Outside the South the Black percentage was 62 percent compared to 29 percent for White men

Regression Estimates of the Determinants of Relief Employment

Individual-Level Work Relief Regressions

The first stage of our empirical analysis is a regression analysis of the determinants of work relief employment among the pool of eligible workers with an emphasis on the gap in relief employment rates between Black and White workers. We begin by using our full regression sample, limited to counties with at least 20 eligible Black workers and 20 eligible White workers, to estimate the determinants of work relief employment overall in the U.S. and separately by region. We estimate the following linear probability model at the individual level:

$$R_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Black_i + X_i \beta_2 + \varepsilon_i. \quad (1)$$

where R_i is a zero-one indicator for relief employment. $Black_i$ has value 1 for Black men and 0 for White men; other races were left out of the sample. We include a vector of covariates, X_i , that likely influenced relief officials' decisions about whether to offer work relief. The controls include a dummy for whether the individual was the household head, household size, number of own children and number under age 5, and number of other household members who were working. Also included were age, years of schooling, home ownership, location on farms, and whether married with spouse present. Local governments often imposed residency requirements, so we include dummies for individuals born in the same state, those living in the same house as in 1935, and people who had

moved but still resided in the same state as in 1935. While non-citizens were excluded from work relief, naturalized immigrants were eligible and may also have faced discrimination, so we include a dummy for foreign-born.

We interpret β_1 from Equation (1) as a conditional racial gap in work relief employment rates, rather than a causal effect of race. In other words, β_1 is the difference in work relief employment rates between observably similar Black and White workers. To additionally interpret this gap as reflecting differential access or discrimination, two assumptions are required. First, conditional on observed individual and household characteristics, remaining differences in eligibility or economic need between Black and White workers do not drive substantial gaps in relief employment. Second, our results are not driven by systematic differences in application behavior between Black and White workers. While these assumptions cannot be verified directly, we will present evidence and historical context suggesting that violations are unlikely to explain our main findings.

Results from individual-level regressions for the full U.S. and separately by region are presented in Table 4. The estimated Black-White gaps in work relief rates tell the same story as in the raw gaps in Table 1 but are smaller in absolute value after controlling for correlates. The results show that the residual difference in relief employment for Black workers is negative in the South and positive outside the South, with both results statistically significant at the one percent level. At the national level, the raw Black-White gap in work relief employment was 5.4 percent in Table 1 compared with a gap of 2.2 percentage points after controlling for correlates in Table 4. In the South, the raw gap was -6.8 and the adjusted gap is -4.6 percentage points. Outside the South, the raw gap was 11.2 and the adjusted gap is 7.7 percentage points.

The coefficients on other observable characteristics are largely similar between the South and non-South and have the sign predicted by the eligibility requirements for the program.

Household heads, men in larger households, and men in households with more children were more likely to obtain relief. Consistent with residency requirements, men who were living in the same state and in the same house as in 1935 were more likely to obtain relief. Men on farms were more likely to receive relief. Relief was less available to people with more resources, including men with more education and men in households that owned the home and had other people employed. Foreign-born citizens fared worse than Black citizens with work relief rates that were 10 to 12 percent lower than for native White workers.

We explore the robustness of our individual regression results in Table 5. The first check, Model B, removes potentially endogenous regressors, migration and the number of other household members who are employed. In Model C, we run a logit regression. Model D counts people who are out of the labor force as unemployed, as the decision to join the labor force may be dependent on the opportunities for work relief. Model E uses the 1930-1940 linked sample to control for prior occupation group (including unemployed and out of labor force as separate groups). All robustness checks show similar patterns. Relief rates were higher for Black men outside of the South, and lower for Black men in the South.

Racial Differences in Work Relief Applications

As noted above, we primarily interpret our estimated Black-White gaps as reflecting differences in access to relief employment between observably similar Black and White workers. One limitation of our data is that we cannot observe work relief applications. Unobservable differences in application behavior between Black and White workers could also have contributed to these gaps. Of course, differences in application rates could also be part of a discrimination story—Black and White workers might apply for work relief jobs at different rates because they anticipate

different treatment by local administrators. However, they could also reflect differences in job preferences or alternative sources of economic support between groups.

We believe that differences in labor supply to work relief jobs, conditional on eligibility and worker characteristics, are unlikely to explain our results for several reasons. First, after a decade of Depression and seven years of federal programs, it is unlikely that unemployed workers of both races were not aware of the relief offices. Second, other options for jobless people were likely not appealing for household heads who were willing to work. Local governments with some state aid offered relatively low direct relief without a work requirement, but Howard (1943, pp. 200-207) found that households with WPA workers could also receive direct relief. Third, many men preferred WPA work to even regular work because they were worried about the likelihood that the regular work was less stable and could easily end (Howard 1943, pp. 486-496).

If there are differences in work relief application rates by race after conditioning on eligibility and worker characteristics, it is unlikely that these would create a stark regional pattern, with opposite signed effects in the South and outside the South, particularly given that other determinants of work relief employment look similar across regions. For example, one possible explanation for different application rates between Black and White workers is that Black workers outside of the South were more likely than White workers to have recently migrated to the area and thus could have applied for relief at higher rates than observably similar White workers due to having less family support. However, this is unlikely to explain why Black workers have lower rates of work relief employment in the South.

While we do not believe that differences in application rates are driving our main results, we acknowledge that we cannot rule out differences by racial differences in local labor supply to work

relief jobs. Results from a later stage of our analysis help us to better understand the observable determinants of Black-White gaps in work relief employment at the county level.

County-Level Heterogeneity in Relief Access

County-by-county estimates of the Black-White gap in relief employment

We explore the role of local administration in generating Black-White gaps in relief employment by estimating Equation (1) separately for each county in our regression sample. Local government officials determined who had access to work relief and may have had different preferences and systems of doing so.

Results from our county-by-county regressions are summarized in Table 6. We present the means of the estimated Black coefficients across counties in each region, weighted by the Black male working-age population, and the percent of coefficients that are positive within each region. The results show that the average Black-White gaps in relief employment are strongly positive in all three non-Southern regions, implying that Black workers were *more* likely to be employed in relief jobs than observably similar White workers in those regions. Meanwhile, the average Black-White gap in relief employment in Southern counties is large and negative, implying that Black workers in Southern counties were *less* likely to obtain relief employment than White workers with similar characteristics. As a large share of the Black population lived in the South, the weighted mean of the coefficients across the U.S. is -0.026. Turning to the second row of the table, our estimates imply that around 40 percent of Black working age men in the U.S. lived in counties where the Black-White gap in relief employment was positive. In the regions outside the South these shares were especially large, at 77-94 percent, while in the South this share is only 24 percent.

Figure 2 shows a map of the county coefficients, and Figure 3 shows the distributions of the coefficients in the South and outside the South. Both figures show the concentration higher rates of work relief for Black men outside the South and lower rates of work relief in most of the South. Within the South, the counties where Black men had better access to work relief were mostly concentrated in the Piedmont region that stretched from Delaware and Maryland into southeastern Alabama, an area with more mountains that was less conducive to large-scale slave agriculture before the Civil War. Racial gaps in access were largest in Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Kentucky.

County-level Determinants of Black-White Gaps in Relief Employment

Next, we explore the correlates of the local program administration choices that generate Black-White gaps in relief employment. We regress the county Black coefficient estimates from Equation (1) on a set of county-level variables that represent a variety of local factors that might influence relative access to work relief jobs among Black workers. We assemble a county-level dataset that includes measures of demographic composition, farm share and urbanicity, local labor market conditions and occupational overlap between Black and White workers, wealth and economic development, racial attitudes, religion, political preferences, and government resources and relief spending. As each of the explanatory variables that we include may be correlated with other observed or unobserved county characteristics and will likely proxy for more than one facet of a locality, we view these regressions as descriptive rather than causal. However, we believe they are nonetheless informative about the key determinants of Black-White gaps in relief employment.

We estimate the following cross-sectional regression for the U.S., the South, and the non-South,

$$Gap_c = \alpha X_c + \delta_s + \epsilon_c \quad (2)$$

where Gap_c represents the estimate of the relative rate of work relief employment for Black men compared to White men in county c . These are the coefficients on the dummy variable $Black_i$ from individual-level regressions in Equation (1). X_c is a set of county-level variables that may have influenced the decisions of local relief officials, δ_s are state fixed-effects that capture variation in state level policies and ϵ_c is a stochastic error term that includes unmeasured factors. The equations are estimated using weighted least squares with the number of adult Black males in the county as weights. The sources of data for the covariates in this analysis are listed in Online Appendix Table A1. We do not have political and economic data for all counties. We use a sample of 1,318 counties where we have all covariates available.

Table 7 presents coefficients and standard errors from the cross-sectional county regressions. Positive coefficients mean that a variable is associated with *better* relief employment rates for Black workers relative to White workers, and negative coefficients imply *worse* relative relief employment for Black workers. All independent variables are normalized so that a one-unit change in each variable represents a one-standard-deviation change in that variable among the full sample of counties. R-squared values suggest that our variables do a much better job of explaining variation in Black-White gaps in relief employment outside of the South (0.70) than in the South (0.29).

Local labor market conditions are predictive of the local Black-White gap in relief employment among eligible workers in both regions. Because employment rates for Black and White workers are positively correlated, we included the White employment rate to proxy for general local labor market conditions and the county White-Black gap in employment rates to pick up the effect of racial employment disparities. A larger employment rate gap between White and Black workers is positively predictive of relative Black relief employment in the U.S. as a whole and in both regions, while the overall White employment rate is also positive but is not statistically significant in the South. We also include a measure of occupational overlap between Black and White workers in 1930

and find that variable is not predictive of relative relief employment in either region.¹⁰ We included a set of variables representing White homeownership rates and White-Black gaps in homeownership rates and find similarly sized negative coefficients on White homeownership rates in both regions suggesting that increases in White homeownership are associated with worse relative work relief employment for Black workers.

Another variable that has consistent effects across regions is local spending on the New Deal's Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) program. With the AAA program, the federal government paid landowners to take land out of cultivation. The program led to widespread displacement of agricultural workers, tenants, and sharecroppers, and had particularly adverse effects for Black workers. The results show that local AAA spending is associated with worse relative access to relief jobs for eligible Black workers.

Finally, we find that two measures of the level and nature of economic development in a county—the share of households with no radio¹¹ and the share of White households on farms—are both negatively associated with relative relief employment for Black workers. These suggest that Black workers fared worse in less developed areas and areas with higher farm concentrations. Local government revenue per capita, a measure of both wealth and government resources, is also positively associated with better relief rates for Black men.

Beyond the variables mentioned above, there are several other explanatory variables that are predictive in one region but not the other. To further illustrate the different determinants of Black-

¹⁰ To address the concern that our occupation-based index may be mechanically sensitive to minority population size, we also constructed an alternative χ^2 -based measure of racial occupational sorting which benchmarks the observed distribution against random allocation (in the spirit of Logan and Parman, 2017). This yielded similar patterns.

¹¹ To avoid collinearity, this variable is the residual from a regression of the percent of households without a radio on farm share, percent urban, log 1930 population, 1929 retail sales per capita, and 1932 government revenue per capita.

White gaps in relief employment by region, we present the coefficients and standard errors from columns (2) and (3) in Table 7 again in Figure 4, sorting them by magnitude within each region.

In non-Southern counties standard errors are generally smaller, and more coefficients are statistically significant predictors of the Black-White gap in relief employment. Among the significant positive predictors are church membership, share foreign-born among White residents, and a local residential segregation measure developed by Logan and Parman (2017). Among the negative predictors are public works spending, the decline in retail sales during the Great Depression, the percent voting Democrat and the increase in Democrat share 1928-1932, population size, percent urban, and percent Black. Together, these results paint the picture that Black workers outside the South had worse relative relief employment in larger, more urban, and less segregated counties and counties with higher shares of Black residents—counties where the labor market competition between Black and White workers may have been more acute. Following the Civil War, the Republican party had long been considered the party more friendly to Black interests. It was thought that the New Deal had begun to reverse that view, but the non-South regressions show that Black men had less relative access to work relief in the areas that traditionally voted Democrat and even ones that had swung to Roosevelt in 1932. Meanwhile, a higher share of foreign-born in the population, particularly non-citizens, likely relaxed the resource constraints for providing relief to Black and White citizens in the county because non-citizens were ineligible for work relief. With more resources per unemployed citizens, it made it easier to provide Black workers with access. It is also possible that relief boards discriminated more against foreign-born citizens than against Black people.

Taken together, the results from our cross-sectional county regressions suggest that Black men had relatively better access to work relief in counties where White employment rates were higher and places that were overall economically better off. In places where White unemployment

was high, there was likely more competition for relief jobs and local officials may have been more likely to favor White workers in determining eligibility.

Is the 1940 Evidence Representative of Earlier New Deal Years?

The focus of this paper has been on emergency work relief employment in 1940 because the full count 1940 Census allows us to estimate Black-White differences in work relief employment rates among workers without regular jobs while controlling for a rich set of individual correlates. For the sake of comparison, we have additionally compiled county-level information on counts of work relief recipients in 1937, and recipients of direct and work relief in October 1933 and March 1935 (South only), when relief was administered by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).¹² The most consistent measure available by race is the number of people receiving relief, which we divide by the relevant population aged 21 and over from 1930 for the FERA data in 1933 and 1935 and from 1940 for the WPA data in 1937. These earlier county-level data provide context for our 1940 results and allow us to assess whether the patterns we document were present in prior years.

Raw Black-White gaps in relief employment rates in each of these alternative samples are presented in Table 8. They reveal consistent regional patterns across the years and echo the results from our 1940 analysis. In all four time periods, the share of the population receiving relief was substantially higher for Black residents than for White residents in all non-Southern regions. Meanwhile, Black-White gaps were much smaller in the South, positive in the FERA years of 1933 and 1935 and zero or negative in 1937 and 1940 when the WPA had replaced the FERA. It is important to

¹² FERA 1933 is from Federal Emergency Relief Administration 1934, Tables 8 and 9; FERA 1935 is from Works Progress Administration, (1938, Table 15A for each Southern state); Emergency Relief 1937 is from Haines, ICSR No. 2836, Part 30, and Emergency Work 1940 estimates calculated from 1940 IPUMS Full Census (Ruggles et. al. 2015)

note that these are unadjusted differences. Black workers had much lower incomes and were typically hit harder by the Depression than White workers and their relative need may have been different during the mid-1930s than during the late 1930s. Nonetheless, these earlier regional gaps provide useful context for our analysis, revealing that the regional differences that we document—positive Black-White gaps in work relief employment rates outside of the South and much smaller gaps within the South—were present for earlier time periods as well.

The cross-sectional patterns in the raw Black-White gaps in emergency work relief participation were very similar in 1937 and 1940. In fact, correlations across counties weighted by the 1940 Black population were 0.987. This suggests that whatever determined racial gaps in relief employment under the WPA was persistent over time.

On the other hand, county-level correlations between WPA relief participation and participation during the FERA years are relatively low. The Black-population-weighted correlations across counties between the FERA Black-White differences in 1933 and the WPA years were only 0.14 for 1937 and 0.16 for 1940. In Southern states, the weighted correlations between the FERA in 1935 and the post-FERA years 1937 and 1940 were both around 0.25. Within the FERA years, geographic variation in Black-White gaps was unstable—the weighted correlation between the 1933 and 1935 FERA data was only slightly higher at 0.41.

There are institutional features that account for the differences in the Black-White gaps and the regional patterns in those gaps across the two eras. The WPA was entirely a work relief program so all relief recipients were employed in 1937 and 1940. The FERA, on the other hand, offered relief with and without work requirements—the share of FERA relief cases with a work requirement was 42 percent in October 1933 and 46 percent in March 1935.¹³ Thus, the population of relief recipients

¹³ Percentages calculated using data from Work Progress Administration (1942, pp. 127 and 154).

includes a significant number of people who might not have been able to participate in work relief. A second feature relates to the federal government's role. Under the WPA, the federal government had more control than under the FERA because federal project managers oversaw hiring and project choice after being given the list of eligible people by the local officials. Under the FERA, the federal government handed the money to the states, which then determined how the money would be distributed across local areas that both ran the projects and determined who was eligible. We leave further analysis of differences in Black-White access in the FERA era to future research.

Conclusion and Discussion

During the Great Depression, the U.S. federal government articulated nondiscrimination goals as it implemented a series of relief and public works programs designed to mitigate hardship and support economic recovery. However, the implementation of those goals was in the hands of state and local administrators. In this paper, we quantify racial disparities in access to New Deal emergency relief employment in 1940 using uniquely detailed individual-level data from the full-count census. We emphasize the geography of racial inequality by estimating Black-White gaps in relief employment separately by county and examining the regional patterns and local determinants of those county-level gaps.

Our results suggest that the federal government's success at achieving nondiscrimination was mixed and, importantly, depended heavily on location. We estimate that about 40 percent of Black male workers in the United States lived in counties where their rate of work relief employment in 1940 was the same or higher than observationally equivalent White male workers; the regional breakdown was 94 percent in the Midwest, 90 percent in the West, 77 percent in the Northeast, and 24 percent in the South. Linking our county-by-county estimates to a broad set of local county characteristics, we

identify several factors associated with this geographic variation in weighted regressions with state fixed effects. Black workers had better relative access to relief employment in counties with higher White employment rates, a larger gap between White and Black employment rates, and larger local government tax revenue. In areas where resources were more scarce and where there were more unemployed White men, Black men fared worse. Black access to relief was worse in the areas where the AAA farm programs were paying farmers to take acreage out of production, a program that helped drive tenants and croppers out of farming. Outside the South, Black relative access was lower in areas with a higher percent Black, larger populations, and more urban areas. Even though New Deal actions may have started a shift in Black support for Democrats, Black men outside the South had relatively worse access to work relief in counties that traditionally voted for Democrats and in counties that swung to Roosevelt in 1932.

Our analysis has a few limitations. We examine only the employment margin and do not measure job quality or wages, which may also have reflected disparate treatment. We cannot observe application behavior and thus cannot rule out differences in application rates between observably similar Black and White workers or across regions. Finally, we lack the detailed data for individual correlates to explore whether our results would have differed during the FERA work relief era, when federal oversight was even weaker. Future research could investigate the long-run effects of differential access to work relief on Black economic mobility.

Before the New Deal, responsibility for aiding the poor and unemployed rested largely with state and local governments. Although the federal government became involved in poverty relief efforts during the New Deal era, it continued to rely on state and local governments to determine who would have access to relief. The issue of state and local administration has continued to influence anti-discrimination efforts beyond 1940. For example, the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision marked the beginning of a process of eliminating segregated schools. This

process happened area by area and took multiple decades. Subsequent Civil Rights legislation and court decisions similarly depended on local implementation. As a modern example, federal efforts to increase health insurance coverage among disadvantaged groups through the Affordable Care Act had vastly different results across localities due to differences in state administration (Aboulafia et al. 2024). Our results underscore the central role of local administration in mediating federal policy, helping explain why federal programs can produce sharply unequal outcomes across places.

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Table 1
Labor Market Status of Black and White Males in 1940

Panel A: Black and White Men 18-65	All	Black	White	South		Non-South	
				Black	White	Black	White
Labor Force Participation Rate	89.7	88.6	89.8	89.8	89.8	85.2	89.8
Of those in Labor Force:							
Share Employed (Regular Work)	86.3	83.1	86.6	88.0	89.0	67.7	85.8
Share Employed (Relief)	5.1	7.1	4.9	4.7	5.0	14.5	4.8
Share Unemployed	8.6	9.9	8.5	7.3	5.9	17.8	9.4
Work Relief Rate (Share of Eligible)	37.0	41.8	36.3	39.2	46.0	44.9	33.8
Total Number (thousands)	40,027	3,624	36,404	2,707	9,428	917	26,976
Panel B: Regression Sample							
Labor Force Participation Rate	All	Black	White	South		Non-South	
	89.7	88.8	89.8	89.8	89.7	85.7	89.8
Of those in Labor Force:							
Share Employed (Regular Work)	86.2	82.8	86.6	87.8	89.4	67.6	85.5
Share Employed (Relief)	4.8	7.2	4.5	4.8	4.7	14.6	4.4
Share Unemployed	9.0	10.0	8.9	7.4	5.9	17.9	10.0
Work Relief Rate (Share of Eligible)	34.9	41.8	33.8	39.1	44.5	44.9	30.5
Total Number (thousands)	31,270	3,528	27,741	2,632	8,080	897	19,661

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: The sample includes men ages 18-65. Work relief rate is calculated as number of relief workers divided by the sum of the number of relief workers and the number unemployed.

Table 2
Work Relief Rates in 1940, By State

State	Black Rate	White Rate	Black-White Gap
Non-South			
Michigan	52.3%	31.0%	21.4%
Illinois	56.1%	35.0%	21.2%
New Jersey	48.6%	28.6%	19.9%
New York	37.3%	19.8%	17.5%
Ohio	54.7%	38.2%	16.5%
California	43.6%	27.8%	15.8%
Indiana	48.1%	39.5%	8.6%
Massachusetts	45.2%	38.9%	6.2%
Missouri	44.8%	40.2%	4.6%
Kansas	46.0%	42.1%	3.9%
Pennsylvania	28.4%	25.5%	2.9%
South			
District of Columbia	46.3%	24.3%	22.0%
Delaware	31.3%	25.1%	6.2%
Maryland	34.0%	29.0%	5.0%
Oklahoma	40.5%	43.3%	-2.8%
South Carolina	61.8%	64.9%	-3.1%
Louisiana	37.2%	41.4%	-4.2%
Georgia	46.1%	53.1%	-6.9%
Texas	33.1%	40.6%	-7.5%
Virginia	29.3%	37.2%	-8.0%
Florida	38.8%	48.0%	-9.2%
West Virginia	27.1%	37.9%	-10.8%
North Carolina	39.1%	50.1%	-11.0%
Arkansas	44.4%	55.8%	-11.4%
Kentucky	26.2%	37.8%	-11.6%
Alabama	41.6%	53.5%	-11.9%
Tennessee	30.7%	45.0%	-14.3%
Mississippi	44.4%	59.9%	-15.4%

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: Work relief rates are presented for all states with at least 10,000 Black men in the labor force. The relief rate is calculated as the number of workers with work relief jobs divided by the number of workers either unemployed or on relief.

Table 3
Occupation Distribution by Labor Force Status

Panel A: South	Employed		Unemployed		Work Relief	
	(1) (2)		(3) (4)		(5) (6)	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Professional and Technical	1.8	5.2	1.0	2.2	1.3	2.3
Farmers & Farm Managers	25.9	23.4	1.6	3.0	1.0	1.8
Managers, Officials, & Proprietors	1.0	9.6	0.3	2.6	0.1	1.3
Clerical and Kindred	0.6	5.7	0.4	3.9	0.8	5.8
Sales Workers	0.6	6.0	0.5	4.7	0.1	0.4
Craftsmen	3.5	12.7	5.4	16.9	3.2	12.8
Operatives	11	15.7	12.8	19.4	4.4	7.9
Household Service	2.8	0.2	4.1	0.4	0.4	0.2
Service Outside Household	8.2	3.3	8.3	3.1	3.1	3.7
Farm Foremen	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Farm Laborers	23.3	10.6	15.6	13.7	3.6	3.2
Non-Farm Laborers	20.6	6.8	43.1	22.4	80.7	59.4
Unspecified	0.6	0.7	6.9	7.7	1.3	1.3
Panel B: Non-South	Employed		Unemployed		Work Relief	
	(1) (2)		(3) (4)		(5) (6)	
	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
Professional and Technical	3.8	6.6	2.5	3.2	2.2	3.5
Farmers & Farm Managers	1.4	11.2	0.4	0.9	0.3	0.9
Managers, Officials, & Proprietors	3.0	10.5	0.8	2.6	0.2	1.2
Clerical and Kindred	3.8	7.7	1.7	5.2	2.2	7.3
Sales Workers	1.8	7.1	1.2	5.4	0.2	0.7
Craftsmen	7.7	16.7	8.3	18.7	4.4	12.1
Operatives	18.9	19.4	13.6	20.8	4.8	8.2
Household Service	4.1	0.3	2.8	0.3	0.4	0.2
Service Outside Household	26.9	5.8	15.4	4.8	5.1	4.9
Farm foremen	0.0	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Farm Laborers	3.5	5.7	4.8	7.8	3.0	2.9
Non-Farm Laborers	24.2	8.3	41.7	22.4	75.8	56.0
Unspecified	0.9	0.8	6.7	7.8	1.2	2.0

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: Occupations listed for relief workers are their occupations on the work relief jobs and not their usual occupations. Occupations for the unemployed are their usual occupations when employed.

Table 4
 Individual Regression Results for the Entire U.S, the South, and Non-South:
 Determinants of Work Relief Employment

	All	South	Non-South
Black	0.0217 (0.0138)	-0.0459*** (0.0105)	0.0766*** (0.0264)
Foreign Born	-0.0998*** (0.0144)	-0.125*** (0.0105)	-0.0977*** (0.0150)
Household Head	0.148*** (0.005)	0.196*** (0.005)	0.134*** (0.006)
Others Employed in HH	-0.0319*** (0.0014)	-0.0272*** (0.0020)	-0.0320*** (0.0017)
Own Home	-0.0450*** (0.0044)	-0.0460*** (0.0035)	-0.0420*** (0.0054)
Age	-0.0014 (0.0072)	-0.0398*** (0.0094)	0.0123 (0.0081)
Age Squared	0.0008 (0.0007)	0.0043*** (0.0010)	-0.0003 (0.0008)
Years of Education	-0.0104*** (0.0011)	-0.0116*** (0.0015)	-0.0102*** (0.0016)
Years of Education Squared	0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0005*** (0.0001)	0.0002*** (0.0001)
On Farm	0.127*** (0.00699)	0.156*** (0.00616)	0.0891*** (0.00865)
Married	-0.0139*** (0.0009)	-0.00924*** (0.0007)	-0.0146*** (0.0012)
Born Same State	0.00382 (0.00735)	0.0385*** (0.00804)	0.000914 (0.00908)
Same House as 5 years Ago	0.0608*** (0.0073)	0.0582*** (0.0064)	0.0612*** (0.0082)
Same State as 5 years Ago	0.0919*** (0.00617)	0.0687*** (0.00640)	0.0951*** (0.00721)
Number of Children	0.0131*** (0.000798)	0.0103*** (0.00128)	0.0148*** (0.000929)
Number of Children under 5	0.0172*** (0.0011)	0.0083*** (0.0011)	0.0211*** (0.0012)
Total People in HH	0.0108*** (0.0006)	0.0096*** (0.0011)	0.0106*** (0.0006)
Observations	4,911,685	1,219,513	3,692,172
R-squared	0.111	0.108	0.108

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: The dependent variable is equal to one if on work relief. Sample is men who are unemployed or on work relief and is limited to men aged 18-65 and U.S. Citizens. Standard errors in parentheses are

clustered at the county level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 5
Black-White Gaps in Relief Employment from Individual Regressions: Robustness Checks

Coefficients on Black	(1) All	(2) South	(3) Non-South
Model A: Main specification	0.0217 (0.0138)	-0.0459*** (0.0105)	0.0766*** (0.0264)
Model B: Number employed and migration not included	0.0191 (0.0146)	-0.0530*** (0.0106)	0.0806*** (0.0258)
Model C: Logit (marginal effects at means)	0.0279** (0.0143)	-0.0472*** (0.0117)	0.0799*** (0.0263)
Model D: Include people not in labor force	0.0079 (0.0091)	-0.0382*** (0.0072)	0.0623*** (0.0177)
Model E: Control for Occ. Group in 1930	0.0038 (0.0123)	-0.0275*** (0.0083)	0.0610*** (0.0168)
Observations: Models A-C	4,911,685	1,219,513	3,692,172
Observations: Model D	9,043,147	2,462,206	6,580,941
Observations: Model E	2,242,158	531,095	1,711,063

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: The dependent variable is equal to one if on work relief and zero if unemployed. Table only shows the coefficient on Black for each model. Sample is men who are unemployed or on work relief and is limited to Black and White men aged 18-65 and U.S. Citizens. Model A is our main specification (identical to table 4). Model B removes controls for the number of others employed in household and for migration. Model C includes the same controls as the main specification in a logistic regression. Marginal effects at the means of the variables are shown. Model D counts people not in the labor force as unemployed. Model E uses the linked 1930-1940 IPUMS sample and controls for the occupational group and employment status in 1930. All standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the county level. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 6
Coefficient Summaries: County-by-County Work Relief Regressions

	U.S.	Northeast	Midwest	West	South
Weighted Mean of Black Coefficients	-0.026	0.086	0.136	0.137	-0.069
Percent Coefficients Positive (weighted)	39.6	76.9	94.3	90.4	24.4
Number of Counties	1,413	108	234	49	1,022
Black Labor Force Aged 18-65 (Thousands)	3,127	338	382	45	2,362

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015)

Notes: This table presents weighted averages by region of the Black coefficients obtained by estimating Equation (1) separately for each county in our sample. The sample includes all counties with at least 20 unemployed Black and White men. Means are weighted by the Black male population in the labor force aged 18-65.

Table 7
County-Level Regression Results: Determinants of Black-White Gaps in Work Relief Rates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	
	Full	South	Non-South	
Log Population, 1930	-0.008 (0.008)	-0.006 (0.011)	-0.020*** (0.006)	
Percent Black, 1940	0.007 (0.010)	0.010 (0.011)	-0.071*** (0.020)	
White Percent Foreign-Born, 1940	0.003 (0.008)	0.003 (0.016)	0.015*** (0.005)	
White Employment Rate, 1930	0.014* (0.008)	0.007 (0.010)	0.032*** (0.008)	
White - Black Employment Rate, 1930	0.038*** (0.013)	0.045** (0.021)	0.022** (0.009)	
Black-White Occupation Difference, 1930	-0.002 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.010)	0.003 (0.010)	
White Homeownership Rate, 1940	-0.020** (0.010)	-0.017 (0.010)	-0.027** (0.011)	
White - Black Homeownership Rate, 1940	0.001 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.009)	0.011 (0.007)	
Segregation Index, 1930	-0.021* (0.011)	-0.033* (0.018)	0.014** (0.005)	
Lynchings, 1900-1939	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.004 (0.008)	0.001 (0.008)	
Retail Sales PC 1929	-0.008 (0.014)	-0.022 (0.021)	0.010 (0.010)	
Decline in Retail Sales PC 1929-1933	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.015* (0.008)	
Local Government Revenue PC, 1932	0.041*** (0.014)	0.052** (0.020)	0.004 (0.012)	
Relief PC 1933-1939	0.001 (0.012)	-0.006 (0.015)	0.011 (0.007)	
Public Works PC 1933-1939	-0.004 (0.005)	-0.003 (0.006)	-0.012** (0.005)	
AAA PC, 1933-1937	-0.035*** (0.008)	-0.035*** (0.009)	-0.028* (0.014)	
Percent with No Radio Residual, 1930	-0.028** (0.012)	-0.028 (0.020)	-0.016** (0.007)	
White Percent on Farm, 1940	-0.029** (0.014)	-0.034** (0.016)	-0.010 (0.029)	
Percent Urban, 1930	0.004 (0.011)	0.013 (0.012)	-0.031* (0.016)	
Percent Church Members, 1936	0.007 (0.007)	0.005 (0.006)	0.015** (0.007)	
Percent Voting Democrat, 1896-1928	-0.016* (0.009)	-0.011 (0.013)	-0.073*** (0.024)	
Swing to Democrat 1932	-0.008 (0.009)	-0.004 (0.010)	-0.020*** (0.006)	
Observations	1318	946	372	
R-Squared	0.546	0.290	0.704	

Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015)

Notes: Dependent Variable is the coefficient on the Black indicator from regressions estimated separately for each county. State fixed effects are included but not reported. Regressions are Weighted Least Squares, weighted by the number of Black male adults, with robust standard errors clustered at the state level. All independent variables are normalized by their standard deviation. Variables means and standard errors of raw variables are presented in Online Appendix Table B1. Variables sources are described in Online Appendix A. Standard errors in parentheses, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

Table 8
Earlier Work Relief Programs: Mean Black Minus White Percent of People on Relief

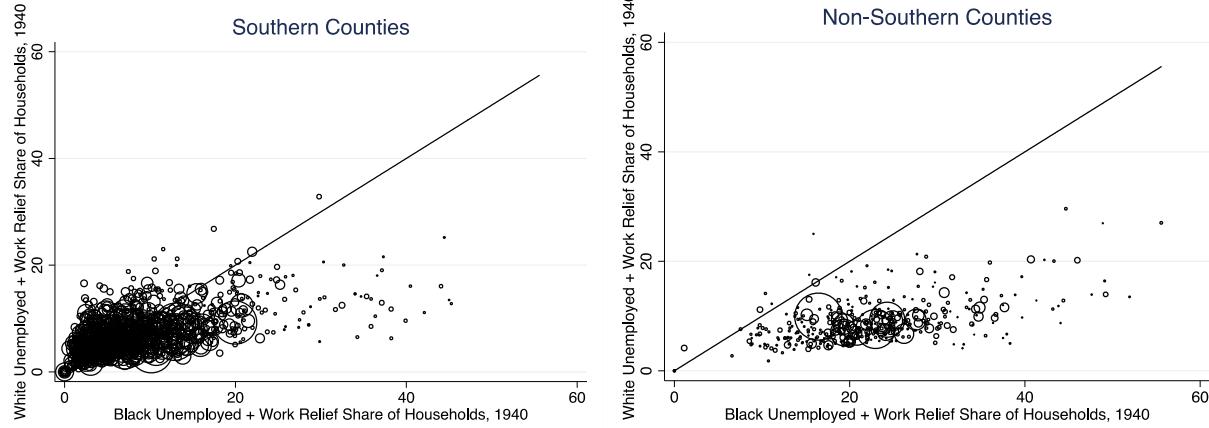
Panel A: Counties	Counties	U.S.	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
FERA, October 1933	1,398	9.5	21.3	25.5	4.6	8.5
FERA, March 1935	1,001				2.4	
Emergency Work, 1937	1,401	1.2	4.0	5.1	0.0	2.5
Emergency Work, 1940	1,400	1.3	5.0	6.1	-0.5	9.1
Panel B: Weighted by Black Population	People	U.S.	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
FERA, October 1933	7,687,413	14.6	28.2	33.2	9.2	22.0
FERA, March 1935	5,650,646				3.3	
Emergency Work 1937	7,689,628	1.9	4.2	5.4	0.9	5.0
Emergency Work, 1940	7,689,628	1.9	3.9	7.1	0.6	5.6

Source: FERA 1933 is from Federal Emergency Relief Administration 1934, Tables 8 and 9; FERA 1935 is from Works Progress Administration, (1938, Table 15A for each Southern state); Emergency Relief 1937 is from Haines, ICSR No. 2836, Part 30, and Emergency Work 1940 estimates calculated from 1940 IPUMS Full Census (Ruggles et. al. 2015)

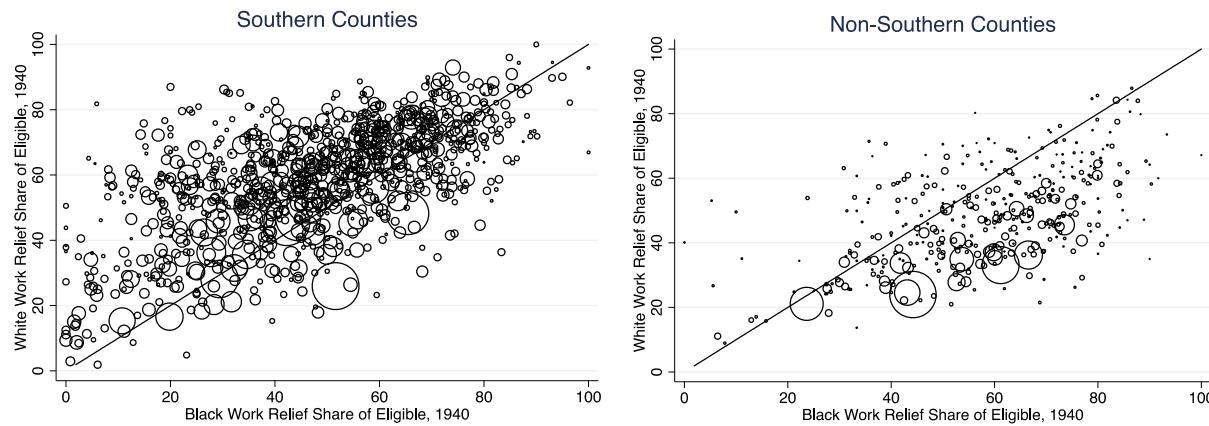
Notes: FERA rates calculated using 1930 population counts (age 21+), Emergency Work Relief rates calculated using 1940 population counts (age 21+) (Ruggles et al. 2015).

Figure 1
Black and White labor market status, by region

Panel A: Relief Eligible, Share of Households



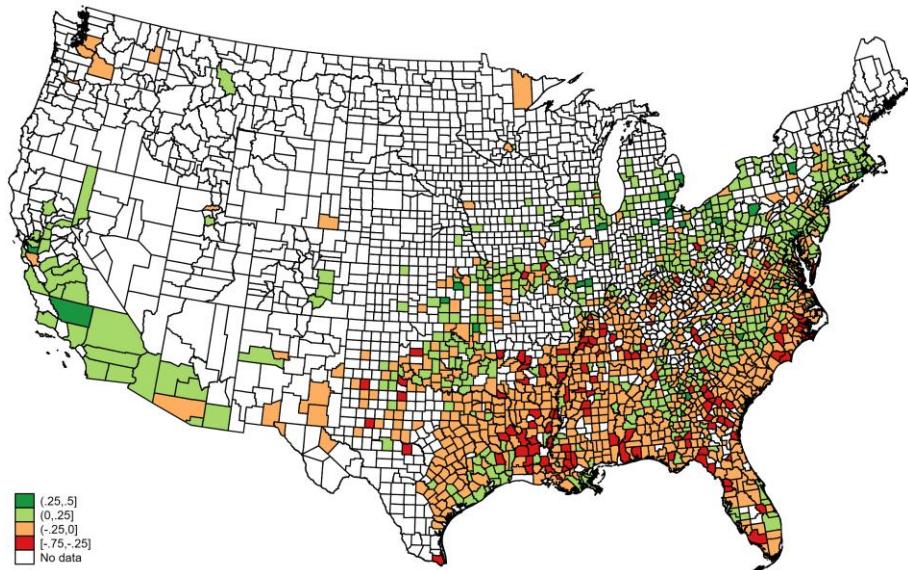
Panel B: Relief Employment, Share of Eligible Workers



Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: Observations are weighted by the Black male population in the labor force aged 18-65. Work relief rate is calculated as (number of relief workers divided by the sum of the number of relief workers and the number unemployed).

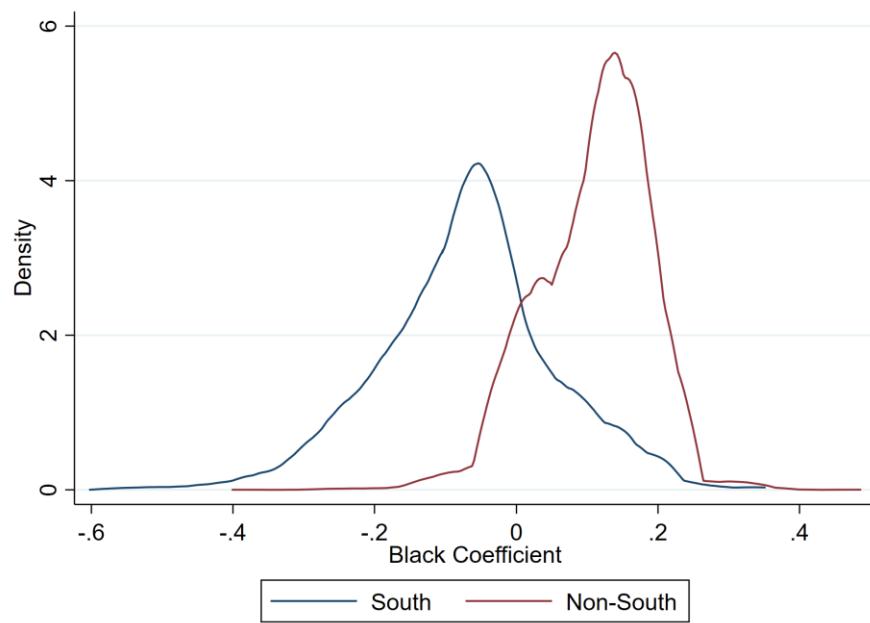
Figure 2
County regression coefficients: relative relief employment for Black workers



Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015).

Notes: Map of regression adjusted Black-White differences in work relief at a county level. A positive coefficient shows that Black relief rates were higher than White relief rates after adjusting for observable characteristics.

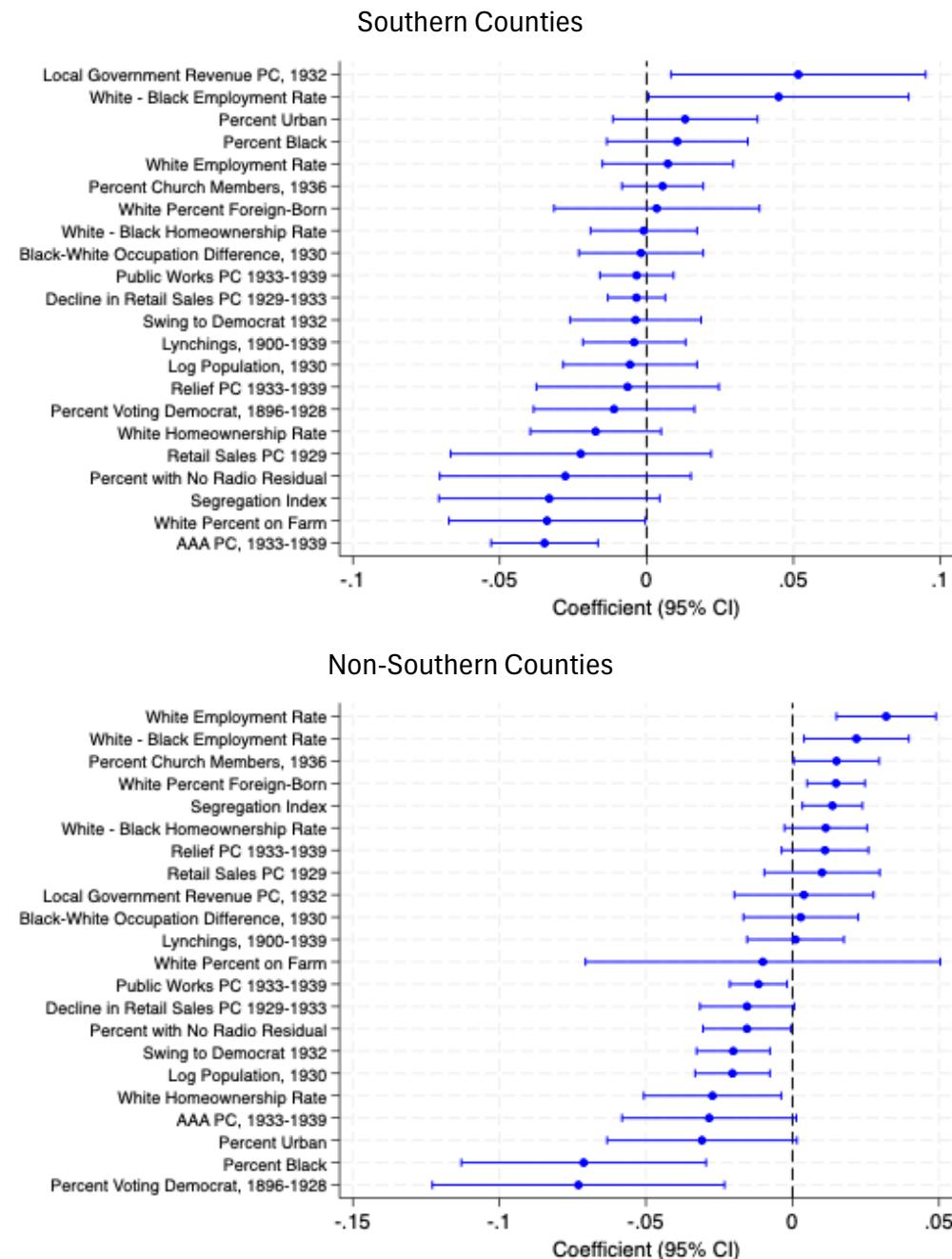
Figure 3
Regional differences in county-by-county first stage coefficients



Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015)

Notes: Kernel density of regression adjusted Black-White differences in work relief at a county level. Density is weighted by the Black male population in the labor force aged 18-65.

Figure 4
County-Level Determinants of Black-White Gaps in Relief Employment Rates



Source: Authors' calculations using 1940 U.S. Full Count Census (Ruggles et al 2015)

Notes: Figures show coefficients and 95 percent confidence intervals from Table 7, sorted by coefficient magnitude within each region. Regressions are weighted by the count of Black workers in the labor force. Standard errors are clustered by state.

Online Appendix A

Variable Definitions and Sources for County-Level Regressions

Variable	Definition and Source
Log Population, 1930	Natural log of county population in 1930. Dataset used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), data available at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018). Originally, Haines ICPSR 2896, part 26.
Percent Black, 1940	Black share of county population, 1940 Constructed from 1940 Census, IPUMS V6.0. ((Ruggles et al. 2015)).
White Percent Foreign-Born, 1940	Percent of White household heads foreign born, 1940. Constructed from 1940 Census, IPUMS V6.0. ((Ruggles et al. 2015)).
White Employment Rate, 1930	White employed as a share of labor force. Constructed from 1930 Census, IPUMS V6.0. (Ruggles et al. 2015)
White - Black Employment Rate, 1930	Constructed from 1930 Census, IPUMS V6.0. (Ruggles et al. 2015)
Black-White Occupation Difference, 1930	We compute, for 275 occupations, the county-level absolute difference between the Black and White employment shares and sum these differences. The index ranges from 0 (identical distributions) to 2 (no overlap). In our sample, it ranges from 0.19 to 1.64, with a mean of 0.94. Constructed from the 1930 Census, IPUMS V6.0 (Ruggles et al. 2015).
White Homeownership Rate, 1940	Percent of White household heads owning a home full or with a loan. Constructed from 1940 Census, IPUMS V6.0. (Ruggles et al. 2015)
White - Black Homeownership Rate, 1940	Constructed from 1940 Census, IPUMS V6.0. (Ruggles et al. 2015)
Segregation Index, 1930	Index measures micro-level Black-White residential segregation based on both neighbors on census manuscript page, 1930. Dataset used by Logan and Parman (2017).
Lynchings, 1900-1939	Data are from Beck-Tolnay (South) and Seguin-Rigby (non-South). We removed duplicates and harmonized county assignments using historical boundary changes. Further documentation is in online Appendix C.
Retail Sales PC 1929	1929 retail sales per capita. Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)
Decline in Retail Sales PC 1929-1933	Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)
Local Government Revenue PC, 1932	Per capita total revenue for listed local governments in county, 1932. U.S. Bureau of the Census (1935). Tables 1 and 3 for each state.

Relief PC 1933-1939	Per Capita relief spending, includes FERA, WPA, CWA, and Social Security Public Assistance. Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)
Public Works PC 1933-1939	Per capita public works spending, includes PWA, PBA, and PRA. Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)
AAA PC, 1933-1937	Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)
Percent with No Radio Residual, 1930	Percent of families with no radio, 1930. Residualized with respect to farm share, percent urban, log 1930 population, 1929 retail sales per capita, and 1932 government revenue per capita.
White Percent on Farm, 1940	Percent of White household heads on farms, 1940. Constructed from 1940 Census, IPUMS V6.0. (Ruggles et al. 2015)
Percent Urban, 1930	Percent urban, 1930. Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018). Originally, Haines ICPSR 2896, part 26.
Percent Church Members, 1936	Church members in 1936 as percent of 1930 population, Haines ICPSR 2896, part 56.
Percent Voting Democrat, 1896-1928	Mean percent voting Democrat for President during elections from 1896 through 1928. Dataset used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), data available at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)
Swing to Democrat 1932	Percent voting Democrat for president, 1932, minus percent voting Democrat for president 1896-1928. Dataset Used by Fishback, Kantor and Wallis (2003), located at Fishback and Kantor Open ICPSR (2018)

Online Appendix B
Additional Tables and Figures

Table B1
 Summary Statistics of County-Level Explanatory Variables

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min	Max
Number of Black Men, Age 18-65	2310	5185	43	95123
Log Population, 1930	10.3	1.0	7.9	15.2
Percent Black, 1940	20.4	19.3	0.1	83.5
White Percent Foreign-Born, 1940	5.0	8.0	0.0	43.7
White Employment Rate, 1930	88.1	5.7	57.8	99.6
White - Black Employment Rate, 1930	7.7	11.7	-21.4	62.8
Black-White Occupation Difference, 1930	0.41	0.12	0.07	0.82
White Homeownership Rate, 1940	46.6	10.9	11.0	87.7
White - Black Homeownership Rate, 1940	14.6	13.3	-53.2	49.4
Segregation Index, 1930	0.49	0.18	0.000	0.96
Lynchings (per 1000 Black adult men 1940), 1900-1939	0.9	0.2	0.0	48.3
Retail Sales PC 1929	259	144	13	795
Decline in Retail Sales PC 1929-1933	62.7	9.1	-58.5	87.4
Local Government Revenue PC, 1932	31.1	20.9	5.6	171.5
Relief PC 1933-1939	55.4	39.9	4.3	371.6
Public Works PC 1933-1939	29.4	36.6	0.0	844.4
AAA PC, 1933-1937	23.4	24.4	0.0	219.4
Percent with No Radio, 1930	80.3	17.9	22.2	99.0
White Percent on Farm, 1940	39.1	21.9	0.0	87.9
Percent Urban, 1930	27.7	27.4	0.0	100
Percent Church Members, 1936	39.5	13.9	7.5	100
Percent Voting Democrat, 1896-1928	58.5	19.1	17.4	99.0
Swing to Democrat 1932	16.7	9.3	-15.6	50.5

Notes: For all summary statistics, N=1318. Sample includes all counties with data available in all covariates.

Table B2
1930-1940 Transitions by Occupation Group

Occupation Group in 1930	Share 1930	Share in 1940			
		Emp.	Relief	Unemp.	Out of LF
Professional and Technical	4.5	92.2	1.4	2.4	4.0
Farmers and Farm Managers	17.0	88.7	4.0	2.5	4.9
Managers, Officials, and Proprietors	8.8	88.4	1.8	3.7	6.1
Clerical and Kindred	5.4	89.6	1.9	4.0	4.5
Sales Workers	6.2	86.7	2.5	5.1	5.7
Craftsmen	15.0	86.0	3.0	5.7	5.4
Operatives	12.2	83.5	4.6	6.5	5.4
Household Service Workers	0.1	77.8	4.8	7.7	9.7
Non-Household Services	2.8	83.2	3.5	5.1	8.1
Farm Laborers	5.9	81.7	6.9	5.4	6.0
Non-Farm Laborers	8.5	75.7	8.6	8.3	7.4
Other/not specified	2.8	86.5	3.0	4.7	5.8
Unemployed	6.5	65.4	9.0	13.5	12.2
Out of Labor Force	4.2	73.2	3.3	7.1	16.5

Notes: This table presents labor market transitions for Black and White men age 28-65 in 1940 (18-55 in 1930). Employed means employed in regular work (not emergency relief). Source: Authors' calculations using 1930-1940 Linked Census from IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2015)

Table B3
1930-1940 Transitions by Occupation Group, Race and Region

Panel A: Black Men in South		Share in 1940			
Occupation Group in 1930	Share 1930	Emp.	Relief	Unemp.	Out of LF
High Relief, Low Employment	45.0	81.4	5.5	6.3	6.8
Low Relief, High Employment	8.3	82.3	3.9	5.9	8.0
Farmers and Farm Managers	39.4	92.0	2.7	2.0	3.3
Unemployed	4.5	66.1	8.5	12.4	13.0
Out of Labor Force	2.8	69.5	4.3	7.3	18.9
Panel B: White Men in South		Share in 1940			
Occupation Group in 1930	Share 1930	Emp.	Relief	Unemp.	Out of LF
High Relief, Low Employment	27.0	82.4	6.0	5.2	6.4
Low Relief, High Employment	36.5	89.0	2.1	3.3	5.6
Farmers and Farm Managers	27.6	87.6	4.7	2.4	5.3
Unemployed	4.8	70.0	7.7	9.7	12.7
Out of Labor Force	4.4	75.2	3.7	5.3	15.9
Panel C: Black Men outside South		Share in 1940			
Occupation Group in 1930	Share 1930	Emp.	Relief	Unemp.	Out of LF
High Relief, Low Employment	62.0	69.7	12.2	10.0	8.2
Low Relief, High Employment	19.6	75.3	8.2	8.6	8.0
Farmers and Farm Managers	3.0	62.0	17.7	10.9	9.4
Unemployed	12.0	46.7	21.7	17.6	14.0
Out of Labor Force	3.4	53.0	11.4	14.8	20.9
Panel A: White Men outside South		Share in 1940			
Occupation Group in 1930	Share 1930	Emp.	Relief	Unemp.	Out of LF
High Relief, Low Employment	29.0	80.7	6.0	7.0	6.2
Low Relief, High Employment	46.7	87.6	2.4	4.9	5.2
Farmers and Farm Managers	13.0	89.0	3.6	2.6	4.9
Unemployed	7.1	65.0	8.9	14.2	12.0
Out of Labor Force	4.2	72.9	3.0	7.6	16.5

Notes: This table presents labor market transitions for Black and White men age 28-65 in 1940 (18-55 in 1930). Employed means employed in regular work (not emergency relief). "High Relief, Low Employment" occupation groups are Operatives, Household Service Workers and Non-Farm Laborers. Source: Authors' calculations using 1930-1940 Linked Census from IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2015)

Table B4
Robustness checks on County Regressions

	U.S.	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Panel A: Main Sample					
Weighted Mean of Black Coefficients	-0.026	0.086	0.136	-0.069	0.137
Percent Coefficients Positive (weighted)	39.6	76.9	94.3	24.4	90.4
Number of Counties	1,413	108	234	1,022	49
Black Labor Force Aged 18-65 (Thousands)	3,127	338	382	2,362	45
Panel B: Counties with at least 10 Unemployed Black Men and 10 Unemployed White Men					
Weighted Mean of Black Coefficients	-0.026	0.087	0.125	-0.069	0.122
Percent Coefficients Positive (weighted)	39.5	76.9	93.9	24.4	89.1
Number of Counties	1,638	131	289	1,142	76
Black Labor Force Aged 18-65 (Thousands)	3,174	340	382	2,400	48
Panel C: Counties with at least 20 Black Men and 20 White Men					
Weighted Mean of Black Coefficients	-0.026	0.086	0.125	-0.069	0.118
Percent Coefficients Positive (weighted)	39.4	76.8	93.7	24.4	87.6
Number of Counties	1,898	158	370	1,263	107
Black Labor Force Aged 18-65 (Thousands)	3,204	340	389	2,425	50

Notes: This table presents weighted averages by region of the Black coefficients obtained by estimating Equation (1) separately for each county in our sample. The main sample includes all counties with at least 20 unemployed Black and White men, and the results are identical to Table 7. Means are weighted by the Black male population in the labor force aged 18-65.

Online Appendix C:

Lynching data

We started with the August 12, 2021 version of the data set for the South collected by E.M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay (E.M. Beck and Stewart E. Tolnay, Inventory of Southern Lynch Victims as of 12 August 2021, University of Georgia). We contacted them through the CSDE Lynching Database site (<http://lynching.csde.washington.edu/#/home>), which is operated in conjunction with Amy Kate Bailey. We then added to that a non-South data set designed to supplement the Beck-Tolnay dataset and developed by Charles Seguin and David Rigby (2019). (Seguin, Charles and David Rigby. 2019. “National Crimes: A New National Data Set of Lynchings in the United States, 1883 to 1941.” *Socius* 5:2378023119841780.). We downloaded it from <https://osf.io/kr8yc/> on November 22, 2021.

The non-South data set had some overlap on states with the Beck and Tolnay dataset; therefore, we went through and removed duplicates. Most often the names, dates, and locations were the same. In a few cases the names and locations were the same but the dates were off by 1 to 3 days. We treated those as duplicates. In some cases the names were unknown while the dates and locations were the same, so those were treated as duplicates. In a couple of cases the non-South data had more unknowns than the South data. In that case I used the Beck-Tolnay dataset as the source for those observations.

The counties reported were the counties at the time of the lynching. There were a number of county boundary changes between 1900 and 1930. We investigated the situations with those changes. We calculated decade totals for the 1930s, 1920s, 1910s, and 1900s. If the county boundary changes occurred during the decade in question, say the boundary

changes were in the 1900s and the lynching occurred in the 1900s, the lynchings were divided by the number of counties involved in the boundary changes. If the county boundary changes occurred after the decade in question, say the boundary changes were in the 1910s and the lynching occurred in the 1900s, the lynchings were divided by the number of counties involved in the boundary changes. If the county boundary changes occurred after the decade in question, say the boundary changes were in the 1900s and the lynching occurred in the 1910s, the lynchings were assigned to the county where they were stated as occurring.