

Distances of Return and Onward Migrations: Race/Ethnic Comparisons

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One of the strongest relationships in migration research is between prior and subsequent migration, with prior migrants more likely to move than those who have not. Onward (to a new destination) and return (to a prior residence) migrations are two forms of "repeat" migration and are viewed as centrally important for assimilation/upward mobility for race/ethnic groups. But other variables are as important, or perhaps more important in predicting the actual choice of destination for a given migration. In spite of its decreasing importance in business and communication, distance still serves as a barrier to migration for individuals because it separates families, households, and individuals from the daily experience of their prior residence or origin. The longer the distance between origin and destination, the greater the barrier that distance becomes, thereby making the possibility of return migration less likely, and the migrant who moves the longer distance becomes the more select, or, perhaps more likely to move even onward.

The classic work of DaVanzo and Morrison (1981) showed that onward migrants are more educated and generally younger than those who return migrate. Research has shown that long-distance migrants are a more select group than migrants who cover a shorter distance, thus suggesting that the distance of the migration, migrant selectivity, and direction of the migration (onward or return) are intertwined. The question of how this pattern plays out among race/ethnic groups in the United States is, however, less clear. Hispanics, non-Hispanic blacks and whites, are each known to have differential patterns of migration. It is also important to delineate differences within each group in terms of onward and return migration, particularly in terms of how the direction of migration relates to distance of migration.

Recent work on differences between return and onward migrants has been sparse. Most has focused on immigrants or retirement age migrants and their socio-demographic characteristics. While recent research examines migration among race/ethnic groups individually, including African Americans (Falk, Hunt and Hunt 2004) and Hispanics, none, to our knowledge, has compared distances moved by U.S. migrants by race/ethnicity in terms of return and onward migration.

This analysis uses the NLSY79 panel study of individuals aged 14 to 22 in 1979, analyzing distance of each migration made from the primary move, through repeat moves. The data cover the period from 1979 to 2004. An onward migration is defined as a move to a county different from one in which the individual has previously lived, but will not count as onward unless the individual has already made a primary, or first, migration. A return migration is defined as a move to a county in which one has lived at

a prior point in time. This makes it possible for an individual to be both an onward migrant and a return migrant, so that the unit of analysis will be each move, not an individual migrant. Utilizing these classifications, there are 4,261 total individuals who have experienced more than one move during their lifetimes. Of these, there are 3,115 whites, 729 Blacks, and 417 Hispanics. Conceptualizing these moves as migration events over each two year time period over the course of the panel yields a sample of more than 44,000.

Migration is measured as inter-county moves. Given that some inter-county moves are to counties adjacent to ones in which the individual has been living, thus making those moves less dramatic than cross-country moves, controls are in place to identify whether the county is adjacent or distant from the place of origin. In order to properly account for differences in county size in geographic regions of the United States (especially in Western states), size of county is also controlled. The distance between population centers of counties will be computed as the distance moved by inter-county movers (Long 1988).

The research focuses on the interactions between migration distance and onward and return migration, specifically, by Hispanics, non-Hispanic blacks and non-Hispanic whites. Average migration distance in each race/ethnic group is estimated and compared across categories, controlling for the characteristics of migrants. Migration distances will be analyzed both as dependent and independent variables in order to provide an ample amount of descriptive information for these three U.S. race/ethnic groups.

When distance is utilized as the dependent variable, the purpose of the research will be to study variation in individual migration distances. Independent variables will be specified as a set of variables representing both the places of residence and personal characteristics of the migrants themselves. The characteristics of the places include income, unemployment and population size and race/ethnic composition in both places of destination and origin. Individual characteristics of migrants include age, education (years of school completed), marital status, duration of the stay, family income, etc. Comparisons will be made between different race/ethnic groups with regard to which variables contribute most to the variation of individual migration distances.

When distance is an independent variable, the emphasis will be changed to account for migration direction, as onward or return. The variant importance of migration distance to migration patterns among each race/ethnic groups will be compared. Preliminary analysis indicates that non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics move in quite different patterns than do non-Hispanic whites, suggesting that distance of onward vs. repeat moves are likely to be quite different, even with other variables controlled.