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"Just a short hop home":

Migration within the South during the Southern Exodus, 1940-1980

Numerous studies of southern outmigration have argued that blacks and whites who left the region during the twentieth century were relatively advantaged compared to those who stayed home. For instance, southern out-migrants were generally better educated, younger, and more likely to have prior experiences with urban living and industrial work than those who remained in the South. This paper seeks to problematize this well-established dynamic by also considering the selective migration of a much larger group of southern migrants: those who moved within the South during the same period. Even during the peak periods of the Great Migration--during WWI and WWII--migration within the South was about ten times as common as migration to the North or West.

This will be the first study to consider the whole range of options open to a black or white southerner contemplating migration during the mid-twentieth century. While nearly all southern migrants probably considered a move North or West at some point, the vast majority ultimately chose to move relatively short distances within the South. Relevant migration theories and the existing studies of the Great Migration suggest that the intra-South movers should have been a less advantaged subgroup than those who made the move out of the South. Southern destinations were closer, cheaper to get to, and usually required less abrupt social and cultural transitions than did destinations in the North and West. Since short-distance migrants had fewer intervening obstacles to overcome, moving within the South should have been a lower-risk proposition in general. In the words of one mid-century black migrant who moved from rural Tennessee to Memphis, "a guy could take a chance in coming here, and it was always just a short hop home."

This paper will argue that much of the twentieth century migration within the South deviated significantly from this expected pattern, however. While those who moved within any given southern state were indeed a relatively non-selective group, those who moved between southern states were always at least as positively selected as those who moved to the North, while migrants to the far more distant West were more advantaged than either the intra-southern and or the northward migrants. This pattern was particularly evident for southern whites early in the Great Migration and for southern blacks during the 1960s and 1970s.

The analysis will begin with a presentation of the main descriptive statistics showing differences in selectivity by race and over time, with maps showing key migration paths.

I will then present several multinomial logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of adult southerners to move within a southern state, between southern states, to the North, or to the West. Independent variables will include migrants' age, sex, race, education, occupation prior to moving (in 1970 only), whether the migrant lived in a metropolitan area prior to moving, and a fine-grained measure of the actual distance migrants moved. The precise measurement of distance is vital for understanding the intra-southern moves at the heart of this paper. Previous analyses of migration distance have relied on center-of-state to center-of-state measures.

I anticipate that my inclusive analyses of all southern migrants will call into question much of the recent research on the meaning of selectivity and distance in the Great Migration. Preliminary analyses, shown in Tables 1 and 2, show that migrants to the North and West were indeed positively selected vis-à-vis non-movers, but that migrants within the South were often even more advantaged than those who moved great distances.

Table 1
Characterstics of southern-born adults moving within or out of the South between 1935-1940

		Destination type			
		Southern non-mover	Between southern states	To the North	To the West
<u>Whites</u>	% with a h.s. education	21	38	33	25
	% moving from metropolitan areas	27	47	40	32
	Miles moved (mean)	0	342	419	1213
<u>Blacks</u>	% with a h.s. education	6	10	10	13
	% moving from metropolitan areas	27	46	46	50
	Miles moved (mean)	0	273	508	1222

Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Series files (IPUMS)

Table 2
Characteristics of southern-born adults moving within or out of the South between 1965-1970

		Destination type			
		Southern non-mover	Between southern states	To the North	To the West
<u>Whites</u>	% with a h.s. education	40	64	64	70
	% moving from metropolitan areas	50	66	58	66
	Miles moved (mean)	0	406	564	1601
<u>Blacks</u>	% with a h.s. education	20	47	44	56
	% moving from metropolitan areas	54	71	48	60
	Miles moved (mean)	0	344	601	1710

Source: Integrated Public Use Microdata Series files (IPUMS)