

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

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Compositional Threat?: An Analysis of the Return Migration and Southern Poverty

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Between 1910 and 1970, southerners engaged in a “Great Migration” in search of opportunity, primarily in northern and western cities (Fligstein 1981; Long 1988; Marks 1989). The redistribution of the southern population altered race relations in the United States. In what has become known as the Great Return Migration (Stack 1996), many southerners returned home to affect the social, economic and political landscape of the South. By the early 1970s, the South experienced net in-migration for the first time in the 20th century (Robinson 1990) and rates of in-migration increased through 2000. At the same time, racial inequality in southern poverty declined (Curtis 2009). In this study, we investigate how the return migration affected racial inequality in southern poverty in an effort to unpack the complex macro-level forces that perpetuate or, alternatively, dismantle structural inequality.

We examine data from the Census of Population in 1970 and 2000, and the corresponding County-to-County Migration Flow Data for southern counties to assess the extent to which migration contributed to changes in racial inequality in poverty among southern counties during the Return Migration period. That is, we examine whether African American in-migration perpetuates or ameliorates sex-specific racial inequality in household poverty rates (separately for male-headed and female-headed households) for the African American and white sub-populations in southern counties by changing the population composition. To address this aim, we use a spatially informed random effects panel Tobit regression analysis to test competing hypotheses about the potential impacts of migration on inequality in poverty.

The *visibility-discrimination hypothesis* is an ecological argument which contends that the dominant white population will discriminate against the minority non-white population in places where the relative size of the minority population is large. Discrimination is rooted in a perceived threat on the dominant white population’s behalf and increases racial inequality between the two groups (Blalock 1956; Burr et al. 1991; Tolnay et al. 1996). According to this thesis, African American in-migration would exacerbate racial inequality in poverty by increasing the relative population of African Americans (racial concentration) and, in turn, provoking a negative response from the dominant white population. The influence of in-migration would operate through its impact on racial concentration.

Alternatively, return migration could directly affect inequality in poverty by changing the qualitative composition of the population. The nature of the change, however, could either increase or decrease poverty. Building from the positive selection perspective, African American in-migrants have higher human, financial, political and social capital from which to draw when they reach their southern destination (Berry 2000; Stack 1996; see also Massey 1990); wages, education, social connections and political prowess gained in the non-South are introduced into the southern destination and, thus, reduce racial inequality by changing the qualitative composition of the African American population. In contrast, negatively selected African American in-migrants have lower levels of capital and possess sociodemographic characteristics connected to economic vulnerability which, in turn, could exacerbate inequality in poverty (e.g., Falk et al. 2004). Racial inequality in southern poverty could increase by attracting economically vulnerable in-migrants.

In testing these theses, we draw from research on racial inequality in the occupational structure to explicitly examine three types of “effects” that may shape racial inequality (Beggs et al. 1997): spatial, gender, and migration effects. Research has shown that the population concentration of the minority population of adjacent areas affects inequality in the local area (spatial effects). However, prior research suggests that spatial effects are more consequential for females than males (gender effects). Migration is a suggested explanation for the gendered impacts of the spatial effects (migration effect), but has not been empirically examined. In the current analysis, spatial effects are accounted for by the racial concentration of African Americans in a county and in its adjacent counties; gender effects are considered by sex-specific racial inequality in poverty rates; and migration effects are measured as the African American in-migration rate.

Preliminary results suggest that while racial concentration is strongly associated with inequality, in-migration is independently related to lower inequality and reduces the negative impacts of racial concentration. Moreover, gender differences are found, although in the opposite direction as prior research suggests; there is a greater impact of “place” for male-headed households than female-headed households which suggests male-headed households are more vulnerable to racial inequality in structures that affect poverty (i.e., the labor market) than female-headed households. Next steps in the analysis include examining race-specific poverty rates separately to discern whether the reduction in racial inequality is due to a decline in African American poverty or an increase in white poverty.

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