

After the Great Migration: Inheriting Disadvantage by Staying in Place

By Patrick Sharkey, New York University

From 1900 through the 1960s, millions of black Americans moved northward during The Great Migration toward economic opportunity and away from Jim Crow in the South. However, over the last few decades many of those destination cities in the north have fared poorly.

In ongoing research, Center for Poverty Research 2012 Small Grants recipient Patrick Sharkey analyzes migration patterns across four consecutive generations of black and white families. He finds that the degree to which the latest generation of black families has remained in place may be a factor in persistent racial inequality.

Key Findings

- During The Great Migration (1910-70), black Americans were equally or more likely than whites to undertake long-distance migration across state and regional boundaries.
- In the generation after the Great Migration, black Americans have been more likely to stay in place. Among the most recent generation, 69% of adults live in the county in which they grew up, compared to 45% of whites.
- Black families that originated in the South are no more likely than white families to return in subsequent generations.

Beginning in the early part of the 20th century and ending in the 1960s, millions of black Americans left the southern U.S. in what would be called “The Great Migration.” Declining opportunity and racial tension drove them out of the South, while growing demand for low-skilled labor and the emergence of new communities drew them to cities in the Northeast and Midwest. For much of the 20th century, large numbers of whites also left the South for some of the same economic reasons.

After the 1970s, this migration stream ended, and since then the South has drawn a growing stream of black Americans from the rest of the country. This movement is documented with census data, ethnographic evidence and

stories from families who decided to return to the South or to move there for the first time. In that time whites have also migrated to the South, but are more likely to be living there for the first time in their lives.

This study finds that in the most recent generation, black Americans have in fact remained in place to a degree that is unique compared to the previous generation and also to whites of the same generation. This pattern of passing on geographic locations to the current generation can instead be described as “The Great Transmission,” and it has important implications for the demography of race and family migration, as well as for the persistence of racial inequality in the United States.

About the Center's Small Grants Program

The Center awards up to four research grants each year to support high quality research conducted by junior scholars in a variety of disciplines. Previous funded projects have included public health policy, immigration, family planning, and low-income family borrowing.

The Center for Poverty Research at UC Davis is one of three federally designated National Poverty Centers whose mission is to facilitate non-partisan academic research on poverty in the U.S., to disseminate this research, and to train the next generation of poverty scholars. Our research agenda spans four themed areas of focus:

- Labor Markets and Poverty
- Children and the Intergenerational Transmission of Poverty
- The Non-traditional Safety Net, focusing on health and education
- The Relationship Between Poverty and Immigration

The Center was founded in the fall of 2011 with core funding from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Movement across Four Generations

This study considers geographic migrations across four consecutive generations of black and white American families. The analysis is based on data collected in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), an ongoing longitudinal survey begun in 1968 that includes about 4,800 families.

The multigenerational approach analyzes migration as a process by which the geographic locations of families are linked together across generations. This approach is consistent with the literature on black American migration based on oral histories and qualitative research. Several prominent studies of black American migration focus on the importance of familial connections to place, which extends over long periods of time and across generations of family members.¹

By considering migration from one generation to the next, this analysis provides several new insights into ways in which the social or economic trajectories of both places and families are linked across time and generations. One implication of this research is that the migration patterns of each generation of family members cannot be understood as isolated from the migration patterns over the course of a family's history.

Staying in Place

This study finds that among families in the PSID, black Americans are actually less likely than whites to return to their families' points of origin. Prior research has focused attention on the new migration of blacks to the South, but PSID data show that this is little more than a trickle—overall, in this latest generation eight percent of black American families moved southward, while six percent moved northward.

Most notable in this latest generation is the proportion of black Americans who have stayed in place. The data show that 85 percent of those in the most recent generation have not moved at least 100 miles away from the places in which they were raised. Black Americans in this generation were also much more likely than whites to remain in place upon reaching adulthood: 69 percent remained in the same county, compared to 45 percent of whites; 82 percent remained in the same state compared to 74 percent of whites; and 90 percent remained in the same region/division compared to 81 percent of whites.

Geographic immobility among the latest generation of black Americans is not only much greater than for whites, but represents a marked shift from the prior generation. Whereas flows of black Americans in the previous generation reflect the patterns found in literature on The Great Migration, flows in the most recent generation reflect a unique "transmission" of place from one generation to the next.

Table 1. The percentage of black and white families remaining in the same county, state, and region/division, respectively, from one generation to the next.

	Percentage remaining in the same county		Percentage remaining in the same state		Percentage remaining in the same region/division	
	blacks	whites	blacks	whites	blacks	whites
Generation 1 to 2	56%	51%	80%	79%	84%	86%
Generation 2 to 3	50%	46%	65%**	74%	74%**	82%
Generation 3 to 4	69%***	45%	82%***	74%	90%***	81%

Notes: Sample size includes families with non-missing data in all four generations, and is limited to include only the first-born children of the Generation 2 households, n=2,111. All figures are weighted using individual weights. Tests for significant differences between blacks and whites, *= $p < 0.10$, **= $p < 0.05$, ***= $p < 0.01$.

Implications of Geographic Immobility

To understand the implications of these findings, it is important to consider the trajectories of the places that have been passed down to the most recent generation of black Americans. A large portion of the cohort born from the mid-1950s through the mid-1980s have remained tied to urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest that have fared poorly in the post-Civil Rights era. Northern cities that have been transmitted to the current generation of black Americans have experienced major declines in economic opportunities as well as the erosion of key social institutions that sustained urban communities, both of which drew earlier generations of black families.

These findings suggest that black Americans have remained in areas with fewer opportunities and greater risks over time. If the economic advances made by black Americans in prior generations are at least partly attributable to the willingness to make long-distance moves to seek out new opportunities, then the current low level of geographic mobility in the current generation may be an important factor contributing to persistent racial inequality.

¹ Lemann, Nicholas. 1991. *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How It Changed America*. New York: Knopf.

Stack, Carol B. 1996. *Call To Home: African-Americans Reclaim the Rural South*. New York: Basic Books.

Meet the Researcher

Patrick Sharkey is an Associate Professor of Sociology at New York University. His research interests include neighborhoods and communities, stratification and mobility, urban sociology, crime and violence and social policy. His book *Stuck in Place: Urban Neighborhoods and the End of Progress Toward Racial Equality* was published by the University of Chicago Press in 2013.